THE DYING DAY

GREGORY O. SCOTT

For Karen Traviss and Barbara Hambly
Gratitude, and apologies.

Dramatis Personae

On Mandalore
Mij Gilamar, Mandalorian mercenary (human male)
Kina Ha, Jedi Master (Kaminoan female)
Bardan Jusik, former Jedi Knight (human male)
Laseema, former waitress (Twi'lek female)
Maze, former ARC Trooper (human male)
Scout, Jedi padawan (human female)
Fenn Shysa, acting *Mand'alor* (male human)
A'den Skirata, Null ARC Trooper (human male)
Atin Skirata, former clone trooper (human male)
Corr Skirata, former clone trooper (human male)
Fi Skirata, former clone trooper (human male)
Jaing Skirata, Null ARC Trooper (human male)
Kal Skirata, Mandalorian mercenary (human male)
Kom'rk Skirata, Null ARC Trooper (human male)
Mereel Skirata, Null ARC Trooper (human male)
Ordo Skirata, Null ARC Trooper (human male)
Prudii Skirata, Null ARC Trooper (human male)
Ruusaan Skirata, civilian (human female)
Venku Skirata, infant (human male)
Ovolot Qail Uthan, scientist (human female)
Walon Vau, Mandalorian mercenary (human male)
Nyreen Vollen, freighter captain (human female)
Besany Wessen, former civil servant (human female)
Jilka Zan Zentis, former civil servant (human female)
Arligan Zey, Jedi Master (human male)

The Empire
Boss, 501st clone sergeant (human male)
Darman, 501st clone trooper (human male)
Ameesa Darys, Inquisitor (human female)
Fixer, 501st clone trooper (human male)
Octavian Grant, vice admiral (human male)
Joc, 501st clone trooper (human male)
Ohran Keldor, scientist (human male)
Roly Melusar, 501st captain (human male)
Niner, 501st clone sergeant (human male)
Gilad Pellaeon, captain, *Valediction* (human male)
Rede, 501st clone trooper (human male)
Scorch, 501st clone trooper (human male)
Mynar Vernedet, first officer, *Valediction* (human male)
Demetrius Zaarin, commodore (human male)

The Jedi
Djinn Altis, Jedi Master (human male)
Geith Eris, Jedi Knight (human male)
Ash Jarvee, Jedi Knight (human female)
Lagan Ismaren, padawan (human male)
Roganda Ismaren, padawn (human female)
Callista Masana, Jedi Knight (human female)
Margolis Mingla, caretaker (human female)
So Plett, Jedi Master (Ho'din male)
Nor Vald, Jedi Knight (Kel Dor male)

The Rebels
Hallena Devis, former spy (human female)
A'Sharad Hett, Jedi Master (human male)
Avit Madrisk, captain, *Iconoclast* (human male)
Sajin Nevaleen, Syne's aide (human female)
Zozridor Slayke, captain, *Freedom Song* (human male)
Jereveth Syne, leader, Bavinyar Avengers (human female)
Andrein Yvolton, Syne's advisor (human male)

Prologue: Yesterday's End

The sharp light of afternoon slanted through the forest. The man and the boy walked through the trees, in and out of shadow. Their armored bodies and bare faces flashed violet and gold.

Hard boots cracked twigs and fallen pine-needles but there was no other sound. Neither of them talked. No wind blew.

They came to a clearing where light fell through a gap in the tall trees. A fallen log slanted across the open space. The boy sat down on it and looked up at the man. Neither spoke. They were each waiting for the other to begin.

The boy could sense the man's hesitation. Since they began their walk through the woods it seemed like the man had been carrying some awful burden, though he gave no clue what it was.

They'd walked through this forest many times, both together and with their brothers, but something was different today. The boy could *feel* it in a way he couldn't put into words. He could look into the man's heart without even looking at his face. The boy was able to peer into the hearts of many other beings, but he'd never felt connected to anyone like he felt connected to the man before him now, and he'd never understood why.

Because the boy was young and impatient, he was brave enough to ask. "*Bard'ika*, what's wrong?"

The man looked down at the boy. He was not old; a few shocks of early gray were hardly noticeable in his pale hair. His face was still narrow and didn't crease much when he smiled, which he normally did with ease.

"*Bard'ika,*" the boy said, "Why are we out here?"

"I thought it's time to have a talk," the man said,

"Okay. What talk?"

The man chuckled at his bluntness, but it was brittle and humorless. "It's been ten years to the day, did you know that?"

The boy frowned. He was more than ten years old; pretty close to twelve, in fact. Then he remembered. "Ten years since the Empire was declared."

"That too," the man said sadly. "*Kad'ika*, what do you remember about your mother?"

The boy stiffened. What he remembered wasn't much; no images, no smells, just vague sensations. He felt ones from certain individuals that were very unique; *Bard'ika*, of course, and *Kal'ba'buir*, and some of his uncles. What he remembered of his mother was the echo of one of those unique feelings.

It wasn't enough. He'd always wanted more.

"Did my mother die ten years ago?" the boy asked.

The man nodded sadly.

The boy had always been told that his mother died fighting, protecting poor clone soldiers like his uncles who had been bred into slavery by the Republic and the Jedi. For a long time that had been enough, but lately he'd been wondering if there wasn't something more. Of his cloned uncles and their children, his cousins, none of them seemed to sense the things he did, though he never spoke of them aloud, so he couldn't be sure. Of his father he heard even less, though his uncles spoke of him with a sad, hushed reverence. The boy bore enough resemblance to his cousins to know that he'd been fathered by a clone.

Here on Mandalore they said family was more than bloodline. That was true, but blood was still blood.

"Was my mother killed by the Empire?" the boy asked.

The man seemed to think it over; the boy didn't understand why. He thought his question was simple.

"Yes and no," the man said finally. "The Empire was trying to hunt down your mother. But it was a Jedi who killed her, when she was trying to protect a group of clones."

"A Jedi," the boy repeated. *Kal'ba'buir* used the word as a profanity. So did his uncles and even *Bard'ika* sometimes.

"Your mother was a Jedi too. And so was I."

The boy's eyes fell to the single metal cylinder dangling from the man's belt. He wasn't the only Mandalorian to carry a Jedi's lightsaber with him. Others wore Wookiee pelts or Trandoshan claws. His uncle Jaing said his smooth grey gloves were made from a Kaminoan's skin.

The man sensed his question. "I stopped being a Jedi a long time ago, even before your mother died and the Empire began."

Bard'ika was his uncle, his brother, almost his father. *Bard'ika* was family and he trusted him more than anyone, felt more *connected* to him because of the sensations they seemed to share. Despite it all, he suddenly felt like he was looking at a stranger.

But he wasn't afraid of this stranger, just curious. He asked, "Was my father a clone?"

The man nodded. "Darman was."

"How did he die?"

The boy felt another sensation, a strong and deep sadness. "It's a very long story."

"Why are you telling me now?"

"Because it's time. Because you deserve to know."

The boy sniffed back tears. He tried to look strong, even if he didn't feel it; even if the man could read all his thoughts.

"Do I have the Force?" he asked.

The man nodded.

“I feel things, things the others don't. It's like I can almost look into their minds, but not really, not most of the time.”

“You got it from your mother. I wish I could tell you if it's a blessing or a curse. I can't decide myself. But you're going to have to live with it.”

“My mother... You say she died saving clones?”

“It was right after the Emperor declared that all Jedi were to be hunted down and killed after they tried to overthrow him. This Jedi padawan, this *child* was cutting his way though a whole squad of clones that were just following their orders. Your mother tried to stop him. Etain Tur-Mukhan died a hero.”

“And my father?”

The boy felt the sadness again. It was a deep well that seemed to go on forever. Thin trails of tears started running down his cheeks. *Mando* boys weren't supposed to get weepy like that; he awkwardly wiped them away.

“Like I just told you,” the man said, “It's a long story.”

“I want to hear it,” the boy sniffed. “All of it.”

“It's going to hurt.”

“I'm a Mandalorian. I can handle pain.” He tried to believe that. He had to.

A bittersweet smile carved the man's face. “You're right. We can. And we do. So let me tell you what happened. This is the story of all of us, *Kal'buir* and all your uncles and aunts. It's about people we barely knew and some we never met, because every war tangles up the destinies of people who'd never think they'd ever be connected. It all happened a long time ago, but sometimes, when I close my eyes and let myself touch the Force, it feels like it happened only yesterday...”

A LONG TIME AGO....

Part I: Mandalore
Out of Morning

1

"Kal Skirta has been many things in his life, Kad'ika. *Son, soldier, mercenary, thief, killer, teacher, fugitive. But more than anything, he's my father. I never knew my real father and I think that bothered me for a long time without my even realizing it. But in the end, I found what I needed in* Kal'buir. *There were a lot of people like me- Jedi, clones, drifters, misfits- and we all found a father in Kal Skirata, and the home we'd always been looking for. After the horrors of Order 66 and the birth of the Empire, home became a place called Kyrimorut."*

Kal Skirata knew he had no place being in Keldabe but here he was anyway. He tried to tell himself that he'd made a lifestyle out of brash, stupid moves that would have gotten lesser beings killed, and there was no reason to stop something when you'd gotten so good at it.

They walked through the city's streets toward the ancient *Oyu'baat* tapcafe side-by-side: Skirata in the center, dressed up in his full gold armor and helmet; Ordo on his left flank dressed in a nice new suit of blue-and-silver *beskar'gam* not unlike what his genetic progenitor, Jango Fett, used to wear; and finally Walon Vau on the right, dressed in his suitably sinister all-black gear.

It had only been two weeks since their friend Mij Gilamar had killed Dred Priest, former *Cuy'val dar* clone training sergeant, general thug, and proponent of the recreation of Death Watch, the splinter group that had already brought Mandalore to the edge of self-destruction

once. The plan had been to lay in hiding in Kyrimorut and wait while the Death Watch decided who to blame for the killing. Fenn Shysa had requested this meet-up personally, and he's specifically wanted it in the *Oyu'baat*.

Skirata could have requested to meet at another location outside Mandalore's capital city, but that might have raised flags for any Death Watch partisans keeping on eye on the planet's acting *Mand'alor*, and he knew there would be some. So he resolved to drop into Keldabe long enough to talk to Shysa, then get out again. He just hoped it would be worth it,

Skirata felt better having Ordo and Walon Vau with him. The former made perfect sense; Ordo was the first adopted son he'd taken as he unwittingly fumbled his way to creating a sprawling clan of former clone troopers and their loved ones in the forests of Kyrimorut.

Vau made less sense: another *Cuy'val dar,* Vau had been training sergeant to the Delta Squad clones the same way Skirata had trained the Omegas and the Null ARCs like Ordo, only his training had been much harsher, belying the bitter streak in Vau's personality. Skirata loved his boys and made no qualms about showing it; Vau was the disavowed scion of an aristocrat, and while he cared for Delta too, affection was not something he either flouted or trusted. He taught lessons with his fists.

Vau always used to complain that Skirata babied his soldiers, in turn making them weak and vulnerable, but Vau had subtly changed since one of his own boys, Sev, went MIA during the Battle of Kashyyyk, right before Order 66 came down. He didn't harp on Skirata nearly as much, and was more open about his grief as desperation slowly gave way to resignation over the past year.

Skirata wasn't ready to like Vau yet, but he was ready to trust him. It was a strange place to be in, but considering some of the other fugitives holed up in Kyrimorut, it was a place he was slowly getting used to.

Like a lot of things on Mandalore, the *Oyu'baat* hadn't changed much in centuries. Everything was made of stone, held in place by a grid of dark-wood timbering. The windows, each a different size and shape, were still empty portholes through which the wind whistled on winter nights. The last time somebody had suggesting putting glass or transparisteel in there he'd gotten thrown out head-first into the flagstone street and promptly run over by an Eopie-driven cart.

Outsiders, *aruetisse,* always thought it strange that a bunch of mercenary warriors always up-to-date on the latest means of killing things should live on such a primitive homeworld, which betrayed their typical mental softness. Technology lulled you into a false sense of security far too easily; the way the Trade Federation and Techo Union crumpled at the war's end were proof of that. By living in stone buildings and wood huts, cutting their own trees for burning and growing their own food, *Mandos* stayed self-reliant and adaptable, and never took anything for granted.

Vau and Ordo fell slightly behind Skirata as they walked up the tapcafe's broad entry staircase for the curving wooden bar-counter. It was midday but the *Oyu'baat* was already more than half-full. Most of the men here were dressed in Mandalorian armor; some were knicked, some shiny and new; some green, some red, some patterned in imaginative geometric designs. As per custom, all of them kept their helmets off and on the table next to their amber pints of ale, which made it very clear that most of them were staring at the three helmeted newcomers making their way to the counter.

When he got there Skirata removed his helmet and called for the bartender. The dark-skinned man didn’t have a suit of armor on, but with his broad shoulders, scarred face, and big calloused hands, he didn't look like he needed it either.

“What can I do for you?” he grunted.

“We're here to meet Shysa. Where is he?”

Skirata could hear the murmurs rippling behind him but he didn't look back. Ordo and Vau kept on either shoulder, still faceless and intimidating. Odds were that some of the people in the crowd knew Vau for his black armor; they'd have harder time guessing Ordo.

The bartender held Skirata's eye, like he was trying to stare him down. Not a fool, he realized quickly that Skirata wasn't going to be intimated by a few extra cuts on the face. He said, “Private room in the back. He's been waiting for you.”

“Glad to hear it.” Skirata waved two fingers forward, a *move out* gesture. He marched down the narrow stone hallway to the back room, Ordo and Vau behind him.

Fenn Shysa, acting leader of the entire Mandalorian civilization. was sitting alone, cross-legged before a squat table in a squat room whose stone walls were covered by patterned hand-woven carpets. Sitting low like that while wearing heavy armor was tricky, especially for old barves like Skirata and Vau, but Ordo adjusted fairly easily. Skirata sat down across the table from Shysa; Ordo on his left, Vau on his right. The two of them removed their helmets, leaving everyone bare-faced.

Shysa was a man who'd managed to cling to his youthful good looks as he approached middle age, and knew it. He gave Skirata a winning grin and pushed a big pitcher of ale across the table.

“Thanks for coming, Kal. Feel free to drink up.”

Shysa wasn't the type to poison someone, so Skirata took the pitcher and poured himself a glass. He did ones for Vau and Ordo as well.

“It's been a long time since I've seen you, Walon,” Shysa said. “Been keeping yourself busy?”

“I always am,” Vau said coolly.

“Tell me, I heard you lost one of your clones on Kashyyyk, about a year back. Did you ever find him?”

Typical Shysa; showing he cared and showing off his intel resources at the same time. Vau shook his head.

“We've never found him. Imp authorities don’t give an *osik* about the lives of one clone. The rest of his squad’s on Coruscant, still looking.”

“You mean Imperial Center, don't you?” Shysa smirked. “That's what I have to say to my... liaison at the garrison. He gets very touchy about it, actually.”

Shysa was playing a careful game, allowing a small Imperial garrison to be stationed outside Keldabe in the hopes that it kept a harder hammer from falling on Mandalore. It was probably the smartest way to play it, but Skirata didn't envy him having to manage that mess.

Shysa turned and looked at Ordo. “And which one are you? One of Kal's Nulls or one of his, ah, newer sons?”

“Call me Prudii,” said Ordo.

Skirata fought a frown. It was a game the Nulls often played, pretending to be each other because the mongrels wouldn't know the difference; he just didn't know why Ordo was playing it *here*, when the stakes were so high.

“A Null then,” Shysa showed off again. “How many of them do you have now, Kal? I can't keep track anymore.”

“Neither can I,” Skirata smiled politely. He wasn't giving Shysa any more intel than he already had. “Well, what did you call us down here for, if I may ask?”

“Well, I only called *you*, Kal, but I understand you'd want to bring a few friends. There's a lot of talk about you in Keldabe recently.”

“What kind of talk?”

“Well, you may have heard, but a man named Dred Priest disappeared recently. His lady friend, Isabet Reau, went all out looking for him and eventually they found his body washed up a couple klicks downriver from Keldabe. Looked like someone had stabbed him in the neck.”

“I heard Priest wanted to bring back the Death Wach. If you ask me, it couldn't have happened to a nicer *shabuir*.”

“Always honest, Kal, that's you,” Shysa chuckled. “Of course, everybody already knows you're no fan of Death Watch.”

"I don't see how anyone would be," Vau interjected. "Tolerating those thugs is an insult to Jango and Jaster Mereel's memory."

"So far nothing's happened but talk," Shysa said evenly. "At least, it *was* all talk until *someone* killed Priest."

"We'll keep an ear open if you want," Ordo said. He'd been right with Gilamar, too shocked to keep the good doctor from putting a knife into Priest. If things got ugly he'd surely blame himself. He took after his *buir* that way.

"The thing is, well, have any of you lads ever met Reau? No? Well, she is a mean *buir'shabuir* in her own right. She and the rest of her Death Watch enthusiasts want someone to blame for Priest's death, and they know he had a bad history with the other *Cuy'val dar."*

"Don't look at me," Vau said, "I have bigger *osik* to worry about than dressed-up posers like those two."

"Me too," Skirata said. "They can try to pin whatever they want on us, but they'll have to find us first."

Shysa shook his head. "Kal, Lorka Gedyc and Death Watch think allying with Palps can kickstart their plans for a new *Mando* empire, which proves how stupid they are, but that's beside the point. It's an open secret that you're running a home for clone deserters somewhere on this planet. The Imps would love to get their hands on your clones almost as much as Reau wants to get her hands on you, whether you're guilty or not."

Skirata bit back a curse. They also had three Jedi back at the base, not counting *Bard'ika,* and it was a damned good thing Shysa didn't know about that. "We appreciate the warning. We'll keep our eyes open, believe me."

"I wasn't just warning you. I also might be able to help."

Skirata glanced at Vau, then Ordo. They all knew that he'd be asking something in return. Skirata just hoped it wasn't a repeat of his last request.

"What kind of help?" Ordo asked.

"Well, there's a possibility I can get Reau off your tail. Direct her to a more, ah, preferable culprit."

He was offering to frame another man for Priest's murder. If it kept his boys safe Skirata wouldn't blink at it, but he knew there was more. “What do you want in return?”

“I'm amenable,” Shysa spread his hands. “Have you thought about our last conversation?”

He hadn't told Vau or Ordo about it and he could feel the questions in their stares. He'd already ruled out putting *Bard'ika* out to stud; if Shysa wanted to create some crazy Force-using *Mando* breeding program he'd have to get his own ex-Jedi.

“I have and I still think it wouldn't be in Mandalore's best interest. What else have you got?”

“None of my *vode* are going to pretend to be Boba Fett for you,” Ordo interjected. “So you’re stuck being *Mand’alor*, sorry.”

“Thought never crossed my mind,” Shysa said, though they knew he’d propositioned several clones already. “I know you Nulls are masters of intel gathering.”

“You're not so bad yourself,” the clone responded.

“Thank you,” Shysa flashed one of his winning smiles. “I was hoping we could do a little information-sharing.”

“I still have boys I need to get home,” Skirata shook his head. “I'm not doing anything to put any clones in danger.”

“I don't need clones. I'm not asking for full access to your intel data. I'm only looking for one things I can give to the Imps to earn their trust. I think you know what it is, Kal.”

“Jedi.”

Shysa nodded. “You've got you ears to the ground on too many planets to count, Kal. You must have heard *something* about escape routes for Jedi fleeing the Empire.”

He damned well had, and before he'd been burdened with his trio of fleeing Force-users he'd have gladly handed it over to Shysa. Now he thought of them back at Kyrimorut: Arligan Zey, stewing in remorse; Kina Ha, the wry wise Kaminoan utterly unlike any of her race he'd known before; and Scout, the hapless kid who reminded him so much of

Etain it physically hurt. He thought, just briefly, of handing over Zey somehow, but his buddy Maze would freak, and Kina Ha would refuse to go along with the research to extend the lifetimes of his clones. What's more, he found he didn't *want* to hurt any of them, not even Zey.

Vau said he'd gone soft, but it was always a lot harder to hate Jedi in the abstract. When things got personal, they always got messy.

"I don't think we have anything useful," Skirata said carefully. "But if we stumble on anything, we'll let you know."

Shysa scowled. "You might want to do more than *stumble*, Kal. Reau wants revenge and she's not going to wait. I'm offering to help you."

"For a price, of course."

"I appreciate what you're doing for those clones, Kal, I really do, but I'm not going to help you just out of the goodness of my heart. If I do, and the Imps find out, you can expect Death Watch the pick your new *Mand'alor*."

"You should stomp out those *hutuune* now before they start playing footsie with the Imps," Vau said.

"What makes you think they aren't already? That's why I'm trying to warn you *di'kute*. I have people I need to keep happy here."

"So you're throwing your lot in with *shabla* Death Watch now?"

"I'm not throwing my lot in with anything except Mandalore," Shysa snapped, betraying rare anger. "All I'm asking for is a map to a few Jedi scalps. I thought this would be an easy deal. You barves are no Jedi-lovers, even if you do have that deserter hiding out with you."

Vau was able to keep his face straight. "Like Kal said, we'll keep an eye open. If we get anything good, we'll let you know."

"You'd better let me know *fast*."

"We will." Skirata tipped back his glass and drained it. "Thanks for the ale, *Mand'alor*. We'll be in touch."

The three of them rose and walked out of the room, leaving Shysa to stare at their backs. They went straight out of the *Oyu'baat*, putting their *buy'ce* on as they walked. When they got out into the street Vau said over their helmet comlink, "Is it just me or did we walk out of the deal of a lifetime?"

"We need the Jedi for now. Without Kina Ha we can't retard the clones' aging, you know that."

"We could have at least shared our intel. You know, what he *actually* asked for."

"We need to offload those Jedi to Altis. We can't give them him either."

"*Buir*," Ordo said cautiously. "We don't *need* to offload them to Altis."

That had always been the unspoken option: wait until they tested Uthan's cure, then slot Zey, slot the thousand-year-old Kaminoan, slot the cute teenage girl.

"If we do that there's no telling what *Bard'ika* will do," Skirata said. "He's gotten attached to Scout. I think he's even started going soft on Zey again."

He didn't say that the same things could apply to him as well; he didn't have to. He was getting *shabla* soft and they all knew it. They didn't say it though, not even Vau. They kept walking through Keldabe's streets, taking a pre-arranged route that was as needlessly circuitous as it was hard to follow. There was a good chance Death Watch had watchers inside that tapcafe, and Skirata kept one eye on his HUD's rear-facing visual input as they worked their way through the crowd.

After three abrupt turns it was pretty easy to spot the guys tailing them. It was too far away to tell if they were sporting Death Watch icons on their armor but Skirata didn't have to see it to know who they were.

"What's the plan, *buir*?" Ordo's voice was clear over his headset.

"Split up at the next intersection. Vau, go right. *Ord'ika* and I go left."

"Thanks," Vau grumbled.

"We loop back around and meet up at the intersection we just passed. If you can lure your tail into an alley, do it."

"Kill or no kill, *buir*?"

"Disable but do not kill. No reason to get them after us any more than they already are."

"All right," Vau said, "Let's get this *osik* over with."

At the intersection they split up as planned. Sure enough, one tail turned to follow Skirata and Ordo; the other disappeared in the crowd behind Vau.

"Will Vau be okay, *buir*?"

"He can handle himself. Next split you're going to hang another left and go back to the first intersection. I'll keep walking and see what he does. If he keeps after me, turn right around and start tailing *him.* Agreed?"

"Okay, *buir*. See you in a few."

Skirata might have been overplaying the protective father hand, volunteering to watch Ordo's back, but Ordo didn't mind. They spread out before the turn came and when Ordo made a left hook that looked totally natural. Their tail didn't even break stride; he smoothly curved around and started following Ordo.

"Got you, *shabuir*," Skirata muttered under his breath.

He did a sharp U-turn, not caring who noticed, and followed both of them down the street. This one was less crowded than the ones they'd been on previously, which was just about perfect.

"*Ord'ika*, hang a right down that alley coming up."

"Got it, *buir*."

To the tail's credit, he didn't blindly follow his target down a narrow abandoned lane. He stopped, smoothly unhooked his BlasTech from its hip holster, and peeked his head around the corner.

That was when Skirata popped up from behind and roughly grabbed him by the neck. The man made an audible yelp of surprise as Skirata shoved him forward into

the shadows. Ordo was waiting, and he delivered a pair of strong punches to the man's unarmored sides.

Skirata wrenched his helmet off and threw him face-first into the wall. His gun fell to the ground and Ordo quickly grabbed it. There was a cracking noise and Skirata was afraid he'd killed the *di'kulta hutuun* on accident; then he heard the man cursing in Basic as he fell to the alley's dirt floor.

"Some *Mando'ade* patriot you are. You can't even swear right." Skirata growled and sunk onto his knees. He grabbed the man roughly by the hair and turned his bloody face around so he could see it better. He couldn't have been older than twenty.

"I don't even need to ask who sent you," Skirata growled. "Well, don't worry, I'm not going to kill you, though we should. We didn't have anything to do with killing Dred Priest, y'hear? I wish we did, the man was scum and I'm sure whoever offed him had good reason."

He was tempted to take his *buy'c* off, just to spit in the snivelling scum's face, but instead he satisfied himself with a few nice punches, enough to make sure the kid kept his helmet on tight for next few weeks.

When he was done he let the man collapse against the alley wall and try to wipe the blood spilling from his broken nose.

"If you're lucky our friend left yours alive," Skirata said. "But tell Reau and Gedyc we're staying out of their *shabla* mess, y'hear? Leave. Us. Alone."

The man didn't nod, didn't respond. He kept pawing at his broken nose and moaning like a sick strill.

"If this is what Death Watch has to offer, I'm not scared," Ordo said.

"Me neither. Let's get out of here."

They left their would-be assailant in the alley. When they got to the first intersection Vau was already there.

"Well," Ordo asked over their secure comlink, "Did you kill him?"

“I thought about it,” Vau said cheerily. “Decided to break his hands instead.”

“You're a kind man, Walon.” Skirata said.

“Yeah, I’m famous for my generosity. Now can we get out of here before we pick up more tails?”

“With pleasure. Let's finish our route, just to be sure.”

They started back along the street at a faster pace. Beating up Death Watch thugs was always satisfying, but the fact that they'd picked up two tails that quickly was a bad sign.

They weren't coming back to Keldabe for a long time, not even for Fenn Shysa.

Tallisabeth Enandung-Esterhazy, known to most beings as simply Scout, had never really felt like she belonged anywhere; certainly not in the Jedi Temple on Coruscant, where she'd been one of the weakest padawans and a general embarrassment to Master Maruk. So it was especially strange, and a little scary, that she was starting to feel comfortable in the Skirata Clan's isolated encampment in the forests of Kyrimorut.

When she'd first arrived, dropped off by Ny Vollen's freighter *Cornucopia* with the ancient Kaminoan Kina Ha, she'd been straight-up scared for her life. Mandalorians and Jedi did not exactly have a friendly history, and these clone deserters from the Grand Army of the Republic seemed to resent the Jedi all the more for making them fight their war against the Separatists.

Gradually, she was starting to think that these clones, no matter how much they idolized the Mando culture they saw as their birthright, weren't really typical Mandalorians either. They lived far apart from all the other clans, they didn't seem interested in money, and they were even willing to adopt Jedi young and old into their domain, though Scout was under no illusions that their main goal was to use Kina Ha's genes to halt the premature aging that had been implanted in the clones' DNA on Kamino.

She been spending a lot of time with another stranger who'd wandered into Kyrimorut. Ovolot Qail Uthan was part refugee, part prisoner, but she didn't act like either. Her recent romance with Mij Gilamar, hard Mando warrior and caring doctor, seemed to have brought her deeper into Clan Skirata's fold, as did the tragic destruction of her homeworld by the Empire using a virus she herself had engineered when employed by the Separatists.

The romance with Gilamar seemed to Scout to be an act of healing on both their parts; just as Uthan had lost her world, Gilamar had lost his wife, and both needed something to replace what was gone.

That was how it seemed to Scout, anyway. Romance and the complications of deep interpersonal attachment was not something they'd taught her at the Jedi Temple, though given her track record as a student, she wouldn't have learned much from those lessons anyway.

After the first month or so at Kyrimorut, Scout had fallen into a pattern. She woke up, stretched, practiced lightsaber sparring with Bardan Jusik, who didn't seem to have separated himself from his Jedi past as much as he thought he had. Then she ate one of the lovely group breakfasts Besany, Laseema, and Jilka cooked. She spent most of the day with Doctor Uthan in her lab, helping her with sampling and tests she didn't come close to understanding. Gilamar frequently came by to help them in their work, and to Scout's surprise, and apparently theirs too, they never felt awkward as a group of three.

Uthan was a scientist who designed bioweapons and Gilamar was a Mandalorian mercenary, but when they were in the lab together, Scout didn't think of them like that. She'd started helping them with developing an antigen to the F36 virus, once made by Uthan, then used by Palpatine to slaughter her dissident homworld Gibadan. Watchin Uthan's initial desire for revenge fade away had been a relief. Scout had no mother she could remember, and no

father, but she wondered if they might have been a little like Ovolot and Mij.

The day Skirata, Ordo, and Walon Vau went to Keldabe, Scout spent her time like always. Uthan and Gilamar were especially industrious that day. They talked as though they were on the verge of a breakthrough, and they only stopped when Besany asked everyone to come to dinner, though in truth it was more like an order. As usual, Scout didn't understand a fraction of their medical jargon, and as usual she didn't really mind.

Gatherings inside the compound's central *karyai* were always raucous. Everyone sat around the long wooden table and conversation bounced back and forth from one end to another and back again. It was nothing like meals in the Jedi Temple had been; padawans had been expected to report to the cafeteria, file through the line, sit down and the assigned tables, and eat quietly. In Kyrimorut, mealtime resembled a pack of akk dogs scrambling for a carcass.

Scout liked to sit in one corner, close to Uthan and Gilamar, and watch it all. Ordo, Vau, and Skirata weren't back yet, and Ny Vollen was on an off-planet mission with A'den, Kom'rk, and Skirata's blood daughter, Ruu, but the table was still crammed with people. Jaing and Mereel were regaling Besany with some story of how they'd lifted fifty thousand credits from the Galactic Central Bank as she tried to spoon food into little Venku's mouth; Laseema had one yellow Twi'lek head-tail draped on her husband Atin's shoulder while they listened to Corr rattle off a series of jokes that had Jilka stifling laughter. Fi was talking to Prudii in a lower voice; his wife Parja was off-planet with her aunt, Rav Bralor, on some mercenary mission Scout didn't want to know about, and Fi seemed a little lost without her. Walon Vau's ugly six-legged strill, Lord Mirdalan, circled the dinner table, waiting for scraps to be tossed its way. At one point Corr held out a full roasted nuna breast on a wood stick, and Mird took it all in one bite, skewer and all.

At first she'd had difficulty telling the clones apart, but she quickly picked up differences in their body language and speech patterns, and slight differences in the way they styled their hair or clothes. There was no way she'd mistake Fi and his slight awkward limp with nimble Prudii. Garrulous Jaing was a far way from quiet thoughtful Atin, and of course Mereel's long braided hair was a dead giveaway. She'd mostly seen clone troopers from afar during the war, and she had no idea how *individual* they really were.

It seemed almost like one big happy family, but you could tell the outsiders. With her towering white neck, small head, and piercing all-black eyes, Kina Ha was impossible to miss. Scout couldn't read the expression on her face- Kaminoans always looked so *blank* to her- but in the Force the ancient Jedi felt content. She'd *always* felt content, even when Ny was smuggling them out of one mess and into another, like her thousand-year lifespan had brought her some deep inner peace that short-lived humans could never fathom. Well, Scout was less than one-fiftieth of her age, so she had a long way to wait.

If Kina Ha seemed pleasantly aloof, the two men next to her looked positively dejected. Arligan Zey had been commanding officer to many of these clones during the war, and the old general seemed withdrawn into his own regret, both over the downfall of the Jedi order and their using clones as cannon fodder. Scout had tried piercing the morbid shell he'd buried himself under many times, but the man seemed to almost enjoy his misery. Beside him was another clone but not one of Skirata's. Maze had been Zey's aide and spared him during Order 66. Dressed in a simple brown tunic instead of Mando armor, he stood out against all the other clones for his clothes and even more for his attitude. He'd never been trained by Mandalorian sergeants like them, never developed an admiration for their strange semi-nomadic warrior culture. If anything he seemed to view Skirata's men with a mix of dull disdain and pity, and

from what Scout could tell, they all viewed him the same way.

And finally there was Bardan Jusik. He'd been formally adopted into Skirata's clan too, but the Jedi-turned-Mando had seemed especially despondent of late. He sat to Scout's other side, picking at his meat, chewing, not talking, not engaging in conversation with anybody.

Scout had a good idea what was bothering him. A few days ago he'd used the Force to perform a selective memory-wipe on Arla Fett, Jango Fett's sister and genetically, at least, a sibling to half the people sitting at this table. The woman had been traumatized by decades as a brainwashed Death Watch assassin and later as a Republic prisoner. Jusik had cleared out parts of her mind to ease her pain, even though they'd always been taught in the Temple that memory wipe was a Dark Side tool for manipulation. Arla was off-planet now, being dropped in a safehouse by Ny, Ruu, and the two Nulls. Scout hoped the woman got the peace she deserved. She hoped Jusik had made the right choice in giving it to her.

Like a lot of beings nowadays, she hoped and lot but wasn't sure of anything anymore.

She tried to think of something to distract him. She didn't want to talk about the Jedi Temple and neither did he, each for separate reasons, so that ruled out one obvious point of shared experience. Jusik was only a few years older than her, barely into his twenties, but seemed so much older, so distant.

She looked around the table at all the pairings: Laseema and Atin, Corr and Jilka, Gilamar and Uthan; Fi and Besany were both obviously missing their better halves as well, and the clones were all blatantly pushing Ny and Skirata together whenever they were in the same room. Finally, there was little Venku, *Kad'ika*, bouncing on Besany's knee, acting as the ultimate reminder of boundaries some Jedi were willing to cross in the name of love.

So she leaned over to Jusik and asked, “Hey, got your eyes on anyone?”

“Excuse me?” He blinked at her.

“Well, all the females here are taken, but how about Ruu? She's a little, you know, aloof, but she's nice. Or is she too old for you?”

Jusik looked over the table and said dryly, “Ancient Kaminoans are more my type.”

He was joking, good. “Well, what about Rav Bralor's gang? Does Parja have a pretty sister?”

“I'm not sure. To be honest, I haven't thought about it. Maybe celibacy is the only part of the Jedi training that stuck. Or I'm just too busy with other things.” Jusik placed his knife and fork on the table. “What about you?”

“They're all a little old for me.”

“But the Jedi Order is gone now. So are their rules. And you've said you want to stay on Mandalore with us. Have you thought about it?”

“I don't know. Not really. I guess I've been busy too.”

“But in theory? You've said you also want to stay a Jedi. Do you think you'd be open to... attachment?”

“I'm not sure.” Attachment to Uthan and Gilamar was confusing enough. She’d just been trying to tease him and he'd turned the conversation around too fast for her liking.

“At the Temple, were you ever...”

“Tempted? A little?” She closed her eyes, summoned Whie's face with a thought. She opened her eyes to banish it. “But it doesn't matter any more. He's dead.”

“Are you sure? Did you see it, or feel it-”

“He was in the Temple during Order Sixty-Six went down. I'm sure.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.”

They stared into their empty plates. She felt something soft touch her mind, like a mother's caress. Jusik felt it too; his head snapped up. They saw Kina Ha, head canted, dark eyes settled on them from the far side of the table.

"I'm not sure I could stop being a Jedi," Scout said, "Even if I wanted to."

Something rattled in Jusik's throat, but he didn't say a word.

After the meal, Scout rose to help Besany, Jilka, and Lassema clean the dishes, but Gilamar laid a thick hand on her shoulder.

"Do you have time, Scout?" he asked, all smiles and politeness above his gold warrior's armor.

"Are you going back to the lab?"

"We are," said Uthan. There was an eager look on her face, a kind Scout couldn't recall seeing before. "I think we're close. *Very* close."

The simple sentence meant so many things: long life for the clones, the departure of Kina Ha and Zey and Maze, her own open future if she stayed behind.

But none of that was going to matter if they didn't accomplish what they needed to, in the here and now.

Scout took a deep breath and said "Okay, let's get to work."

Since coming to Kyrimorut, Maze had been surprised by a lot of things: the raucous camaraderie of the Skirata clones, the shockingly low-tech nature of their home, the staggering amount of money the Nulls had secreted away but never used, not to mention the two Jedi already somehow safe under Kal Skirata's protection. The ease at which so many of the deserters had slipped into romantic relations left him feeling confused and, yes, envious, though he had no idea what to do with a girl if he actually caught one.

Mostly, though, he was surprised how *bored* he was.

In the good old days before Order 66 (he'd quickly come to drape a blanket of nostalgia over them; another surprise) his life as Zey's adjutant had been a paragon of order and precision. He woke up, showered, ate, worked, exercised, even drank the general's special caf at a certain,

unmalleable time. When his shift was done he'd go back to the barracks, exercise with the other clones, and then read. He'd read the latest news reports from as many sources as he could get (none of them were very reliable) and he'd ready the commentary from as many points of view, and he'd tried very hard to understand the dimensions of the war beyond the strategy and tactics he got from briefing Zey. He hadn't much company in those pursuits.

Oh, there had been emergencies when their schedules had shifted, but by and large Zey was a man who managed from his office on Coruscant. Maze knew he was lucky, having the clerical job while other clones were dying on lonely battlefields, but he'd assuaged his conscience with the knowledge that his datapad-shuffling was ultimately saving the lives of countless more clones and civvies and protecting the Republic from the Sep menace.

Nowadays he wondered if his entire existence wasn't Palpatine's own bad joke.

On Kyrimorut, he had no job, no work, no purpose. He didn't even have reading material to pass the time; Skirata's boys weren't the intellectual sort. So he had to find other ways to fill his schedule and pass the time.

After dinner he waited until his stomach settled (*Mando* women could cook much better than the cafeteria staff on Triple Zero, he'd give them that), and then he went outside. Several floodlamps were placed at the entrance to the compound's central *karyai* and angled out toward the hangar, draped in camo-netting, that housed the Skirata clan's ships. Right now *Cornucopia* was off dropping Arla Fett someplace safer and Skirata had taken the Aggressor fighter with him to Keldabe, which left only the light freighter *Aay'han.* Normally they left the light out to keep their position hidden, and if they'd turned it on it probably meant Skirata was coming back soon.

It didn't matter to Maze. He picked up a sturdy ax- low tech, no vibro-power, no batteries- and began chopping away at his wood pile.

Night after night he came out here and either chopped down trees from the surrounding forest or chopped those trunks into usable parts. The clones appreciated that, though it wasn't why he did it. It was a good way to make himself useful, to work up a sweat, to drain away and angry energy that he tried not to show in front of anyone. Zey could probably sense it anyway, but being Zey he was polite enough never to say anything about it.

Maze chopped for a while, until he was sweating under his tunic and the palm of his hands stung against the ax's polished-wood shaft. The moment he stopped working, though, he heard the sound of voices behind him.

He turned to see three Nulls behind him, at at the entrance to the *karyai*. Some of the floodlight from over their heads spilled down onto them. Mereel, with those long stupid-looking braids, was sitting on the step next to Prudii, who sipped something from a long bottle. Jaing leaned against the curved wooden wall with his arms crossed over his chest.

“What do you want?” Maze asked. At the moment he was too exhausted to get angry at them, but that could change fast.

“Nothing from you, *ner vod*,” Jaing called. “*Kal'buir*'s on his way back. Should be any minute now.”

Maze let his ax fall to his side and looked up at the sky. Even with the harsh light to his back he could see so many stars. If you stared up at Kyrimorut's night sky long enough you'd start to feel like you were drifting helpless and unanchored through the cosmos. It was a feeling Maze hated. Back on Coruscant, where you never saw the stars at all, you could forget the void was there.

“Hey Maze,” said Prudii, “Want a kip? Quality Chandrilla wine.”

It sounded like a genuine offer, not some kind of teasing, but he shook his head. Knowing the Nulls, they’d probably stolen it from somewhere. “Not right now I'm busy.”

"Looks like you chopped that one up pretty good," Mereel gestured to the log. "How about a break? Not that we don't appreciate the work, but you're cutting wood too fast for us to do anything with it."

They were right about the log; if he starting cutting the the pieces they'd be too small to use, unless the Skirata clan took up selling wood sculptures.

Stranger things had happened, but he stabbed the ax-blade into the ground, a signal of surrender.

"You sure you don't want any, Maze?" Prudii asked. "Could do you good."

It was a genuine peace offering, then. The Nulls were in a rarely generous mood; perhaps they'd had most of the bottle already.

"All right," Maze said, "I'll have just a bit."

"Good man, Maze," Mereel said.

Leaving his ax sticking shaft-first out of the ground, he took the bottle from Prudii and swallowed a mouthful. It was sweet but stung his mouth anyway; he coughed a little and the Nulls chuckled as he handed the bottle back to them.

"You should have enjoyed the finer stuff back on Triple Zero, Maze," Mereel said. "I mean, you had the perfect chance. It's not like you were crawling through the muck all the time like Fi or Atin, you were licking Zey's boots. You could have taken your kit off, wandered down to the low-levels, found yourself some pretty young secretary who'd love a big strong man to take her away from her boring professorial life..."

"I had a job to do," Maze said.

"Some job," Jaing shook his head. "Scraping for *Jetii* scum, sending your own brothers off to die..."

"At least I was trying to work for something bigger than myself. I wasn't stealing and cheating left and right."

"Hey, *vode*, let's calm down," Prudii said.

"Okay, we're marauders, liars, thieves, barbarians. Total scoundrels," Jaing cracked his knuckles beneath his

smooth gray gloves. He said they were Kaminoan skin and wore them even with Kina Ha around. “You're the one who came crawling to us, begging us to save you, you and your *shebs'shabla jetii*.”

Maze lurched forward; his fist rose in the air.

“*Udesii!*” Prudii jumped to his feet.

Jaing looked away. “Sorry, *ner vod*. I had a little too much.”

Jaing didn't sound repentant, but that wasn't a surprise. He'd never been a real soldier. Maze had, and he couldn't believe he'd just been about to start a fight with a drunken clone. His discipline was all gone; Order 66 had changed him into a different person and he hadn't even carried it out. He didn't even know *what* he was changing into, and that was the worst part.

The sound of an approaching spacecraft filled the air. All four of them looked up to see a dark rectangular form, dotted with lights, lowering into the clearing. Mereel and Jaing jogged over to the hangar and pulled down the camo netting so the roof could retract. Prudii, still standing, stayed where he was. He titled the wine-bottle back and gulped the whole thing down, then tossed it in the grass.

“We'll be out of here soon,” Maze said, just loud enough to be heard over the whine of the Aggressor's repulsorlifts and the rustle of wind. “You can forget about us after that.”

“We can only hope.”

For some stupid reason, he felt he had to explain himself. “I didn't mean to be a burden, but we needed help.”

“Doesn’t matter what you wanted, Maze. You are one, whether you like it or not.”

He hated being trapped here, hated having no reason to his days, hating being dependent on these men. He hated that he couldn't even apologize properly. “I wish there was a way I could be more useful here. Make a difference.”

“Well cheer up then,” Prudii clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Another week or two of chopping wood and we'll be ready to build another *shabla* compound.”

Prudii left Maze behind and jogged up to the hangar. The other Nulls had pulled open the forward gates and the fighter's passengers were alighting. Skirata came out first, followed by Vau, and finally Ordo in his pretty new armor.

"Good to see you boys," Skirata said. "Any word from Ny and Ruu?"

"They've delivered Arla, *buir*, and they're on her way back," Jaing said. All the surly, drunken anger was gone from his voice. It was incredible how quickly these rough, immoral men turned to loyal children at the sight of their father. Whatever Maze's relationship to Zey was, at least it wasn't so pathetically fawning.

"How did it go with Shysa?" asked Mereel.

Vau snorted and shook his head. Skirata said, "Long story, boys. Come on, inside. We have a lot to talk about."

They walked straight toward the *karyai* and through the doorway. Aside from Ordo, who spared one cool glance aside, none of them bothered to look at Maze. It was like he wasn't even there.

The night the end of everything began, I talked to Arligan Zey about ethics. I couldn't think of him by anything other than his full and real name anymore; he certainly wasn't General Zey, and he was no longer my Master. When I first saw him onboard *Cornucopia,* when Maze surprised us at the rendezvous point, I was shocked and even angry to see him alive. When we brought him to Kyrimorut I tried harder than anyone to avoid him, at least in the beginning. But he was a tether to my old life that wasn't going away, and I knew I had to find some way to deal with that. So sometimes, cautiously, I'd sit down with the man who used to be my teacher and we would talk.

That night we had a lot to talk about and I knew I could only talk about it with him. Ethics is not something Mandalorians concern themselves with. As a society of mercenaries, abstract principle simply isn't something we consider on a daily basis. The rules we use to govern our

lives, the laws we lay down, are based on attachment; attachment to our family, our lovers, our fellow soldiers, even the places we've called home, however briefly.

In that sense Mandalorians are the exact opposite of the Jedi. Jedi constantly try to discern the place of their actions in the larger scheme of the universe; for a Mandalorian, it's all about how actions affect the people right in front of you. Our ends almost always justify our means, and when I escaped the Jedi Order, I found the directness of that refreshing. That night I'd found that I'd wandered onto unsolid ground again, and my old master was the only one I could talk to.

We sat in the cramped closet he called his quarters and I told him about what had happened when I erased Arla Fett's memories.

"I didn't enjoy it," I told him. He sat on his cot, I sat in a chair, staring at my hands. Even after we'd started talking again I had a hard time looking him in the eye. "When I reached into her mind I found myself reliving bits and pieces of everything she'd gone through, like they were as vivid as my own memories. They were more vivid, if anything, because it felt like I was experiencing them for the first time.

"I remembered the agony of being tortured on Concord Dawn. I remembered killing because Death Watch wanted me to kill. I remembered being locked in the prison on Coruscant where it seemed like there was no past, no present, no future, no time. When I erased those things from her memory I tried to erase them from mine too, but the echo's still there. I've had nightmares where I'm Arla Fett, suffering like she suffered."

I stopped speaking, but Zey didn't say anything, not right away, and I was afraid to look up and see his face, so I continued, "They say wiping a being's memory is of the Dark Side, but I can't see it. I don't see how anyone could draw strength or power from that."

"No one said the Dark Side feels *good* to use," Zey told me. "It's about intention; the need to control. Rearranging the thoughts of another sentient being is as deep and insidious a way to control as I can think of."

"I was just trying to take her pain away. Isn't that good intention?" Zey didn't respond. I didn't want to look up and see his expression, so I asked, "Do you think what I did was dark?" I found myself waiting breathlessly for his reply.

He said, "No, I don't."

"Why wasn't it dark?"

"Because you aren't dark, Bardan. You don't savor holding others in your power. You hate it. It's why you left the Jedi Order, isn't it?"

I looked up at his face then, and I was surprised at what I saw. He didn't have any new expression; he was the same Zey who'd shown up on Ny's freighter, but that was surprising enough. I'd always known Zey as a big man, strong, full of life, and that was how he remained in my head, even when the real man before me was thin and gray and wasted from self-inflicted hunger, a guilt-broken refugee dependent on people whom he'd finally realized had hated him all along.

Sometimes I think that if I'd been trapped in his situation, I'd have eaten my own lightsaber, but I'll give Zey credit. He was stronger than that, even when he was at his weakest.

"Is that why you trust me?" I asked. "Is it *because* I left the Order?"

Zey shook his head. "It's not that, Bardan. I *know* you. You're a man who lives and dies by his principles. It's why I could never understand why you ended up with Skirata. I almost expected you to leave the Order, but this place... These are men of impulse, not principle."

"*Kal'buir* loves his men. They love me. I can't think of a better principle than love. That's what he offered."

"And what we didn't." Zey still referred to the Jedi as *we*, always. He gave a deep sigh. "Kal wants you to wipe my memory, doesn't he? And Maze's, and Kina Ha's?"

"Before we send you to Altis, yes."

"And you'll erase my knowledge of this place?"

"Its location? Definitely. Maybe more. We haven't decided yet. But after Arla I think I can do it safely. And... I think it will be easier with you three."

"You never know what's rattling around in Kina Ha's old head."

"She's an extraordinary being," I said honestly.

"She very much is. I wish..." He closed his eyes, breathed out. "I wish I'd met her sooner."

"Me too."

Silence fell between us. Silence was never comfortable, not anymore, so I said, "I've been trying to use the Force as little as possible."

"I know."

"The Dark Side... I'm not sure if it exists the same way we were taught in the Temple, but with the life I'm going to lead, the Force offers a lot of temptation to use it against others. I want to avoid that. I don't want to be... *different* from my brothers."

Zey had long stopped trying to talk me back into the Jedi Order, or whatever was left of it. He knew me too well to do that. He asked, "Will you give up your lightsaber?"

"I'm already trying to. I use blasters, mostly."

"But you still carry it."

"It's a useful tool," I told him. It was also a memento of the life I'd left behind, and though I'd spun it around in my head over and over, I didn't know if it was one or the other or both or neither.

There was another unknown, one that I couldn't help but think about as I sat in front of Zey. We were planning to send him to Master Altis, but Zey and Altis were too very different kinds of Jedi, who'd lived very different lives. I had a hard time picturing the two of them cooperating on

much of anything, and I figured that sooner rather than later, Zey would start off on his own, maybe taking Maze with him.

I'd been afraid to ask. If Zey said he was going to try and find like-minded Knights to rebuild the Jedi Order, I'd feel obliged to tell *Kal'buir*, and if Kal knew he'd almost certainly order Zey killed. Whatever the man was to me then, I didn't want him to die.

I think I might have mustered the strength, then and there, but we were interrupted by the clatter of feet. The door creaked open and Scout pushed her brown hair and bright eyes through the gap.

"Oh, hey, I'm sorry!" She bleated. It was one of those times when she seemed like a goofy kid, not a Jedi and war survivor. "Listen, we have big news! Can you come to the meeting room?"

"I don't see why not," Zey rose. "Bardan?"

I nodded. Scout had already scampered down the hall to tell the others. By 'we' I assumed she meant Gilamar and Uthan, and from her excitement, I assumed they'd made some breakthrough with their plan to slow the clones' aging.

Under my breath I muttered, "Here we go."

Zey simply nodded.

We ended up being two of the last ones there. I hadn't heard *Kal'buir* return but he was seated right up front with Ordo on one side and Prudii on the other. Uthan and Gilamar were standing in the middle of the circle and Zey and I squeezed between Fi and Besany, who was resting you on her lap and hugging you to her torso. I couldn't help but think how perfect she looked as a mother.

"Thank you all for coming," Uthan said. "We're glad most of you are here tonight, because Mij and I think we're made a critical discovery in our research to halt the clones' accelerated aging."

"We were studying the DNA samples provided by our, ah, Kaminoan friend here," Gilamar gestured to Kina Ha,

whose head bobbed in acknowledgement atop its long, long neck. “Now, we pinpointed an extra element in her DNA that slows down Kaminoan aging processes. We compared that DNA sample with some, ah, relics from Ko Sai-” Jaing laughed- “And we've isolated the key segments that retard telomere degradation.

“Now, skipping all the medical jargon, we think we know how to transplant this to another being's DNA via insertions into the bone marrow to replace the coding that accelerates telomere loss. Each insertion has to be tailored to an individual's specific DNA and telomere structure-”

“In fact that’s been the hardest part,” Uthan added. “I couldn’t have made that breakthrough without Mij.”

He continued, “Since you barves are so alike in that regard, it makes it a hell of a lot easier to perform this procedure repeatedly.”

“Will it bring their accelerating aging down to a normal level?” Vau spoke up.

“If anything they might age a little slower than normal,” Gilamar smiled. “So you might even live a little longer than us mongrels.”

Everyone started talking at once. I heard a squeal from Besany and when I looked at her she had one hand over her face; she was trying to hold back tears of joy.

“Hold up, hold up,” Gilamar was saying, “This is a very, very, *very* novel procedure. We can't guarantee the results whatsoever until we test them.”

“So you'll need a lab rat,” Skirata said grimly.

Uthan nodded. “I'm sorry, but yes, we're going to need a volunteer test subject.”

“I'll do it,” Ordo raised a hand and I heard Besany draw in breath.

“Not you,” Prudii spoke up. “You've got a *cyar'ika* of your own. I'll do it.”

“The Nulls’ DNA has been modified,” Atin spoke up. He didn't do that often so everyone listened. “Are we certain the same process can be performed on them as on us?”

"The telomere degradation is marked by the same strands for both regular and Null DNA," Uthan said. "It shouldn't be an issue."

"Still," Fi said, "If we're planning to give this stuff to Yayax Squadron and all the other deserters we can find, we should pick one of us normal clones, just to be sure."

"Don't," Jilka said from his other side. "You have Parja. She'll-"

"I'll do it."

Every eye turned to the back of the room to see the one clone who wasn't dressed in Mandalorian armor; just the sweaty brown tunic of a working man.

"Oh, Maze," Zey moaned.

"I'll do it," he repeated, and from his hard tone, his determined stare, we knew there would be no more argument.

2

"The story I'm telling you isn't just about my brothers and me. It's a huge galaxy and our struggle was only a tiny piece of something much, much bigger. We can never know exactly how all those pieces fit together, and we can never know what happened in the hearts and minds of the strangers whose fates connected with ours, but that doesn't make them any less real. Everyone struggles, Kad'ika*. Everyone hurts."*

When the first rays of sunlight spilled over the gentle curve of Zhar's surface, the debris drifting in orbit gleamed like a thousand jewels. A few explosions, sparks from a dying battle, burst sporadically against the gas giant's dark night-side face. The broad gray wedge of the star destroyer *Valediction* sliced through the debris field with an air of triumph.

Valediction was had been the last *Victory II*-class star destroyer to roll off the Rendilli Shipyards before the galaxy said goodbye to the Republic and hello to the Empire, which explained its unusual name. Standing at the fore of his vessel's bridge, Captain Gilad Pellaeon had to marvel at the sparkling-clean deck, the bright consoles and vivid holographic tactical displays. It even smelled like a freshly waxed boot. Some people were grumbling that the newly-reformed Empire was producing brand new, top-of-the-line warships even after the Separatist threat had been defeated, but for Pellaeon, such a beautiful new vessel justified its own existence.

He heard the sound of footsteps behind him, quick and crisp, and knew to whom they belonged without having to turn his head. He said, "Report, Lieutenant."

"The Separatist carrier has been destroyed sir," his first officer said.

"I can see that, Lieutenant. What about those two dreadnaughts that are slipping behind Zhar's second moon? Looks to me like they're trying to make a break for it."

"*Salvation* is moving to intercept. Should we assist?"

With his naked eye, he could see the *Venator*-class destroyer moving toward the moon with the hopes of cutting off the two fleeing dreadnaughts before they cut behind the satellite. Once they did, they'd be able to use it as a shield until they escaped Zhar's gravity well and made the jump to hyperspace.

"Captain Hornar's got an old vessel, not fancy a pretty one like ours." Pellaeon turned around to look his first officer in the eye and smiled tightly. They both knew *Salvation* was only a few years older than *Valediction*, but technology grew by leaps and bounds in wartime. "Let's lend her a hand."

"Right away, sir." Vernedet smiled back, and quickly relayed the order.

Valediction's engines fired and she moved forward smoothly, without the tiniest lurch. Pellaeon had expected his new vessel to have a lot of kinks to work out (certainly his old *Acclamator*-class carrier, *Leveler* had) but the *Victory*-class seemed to run smoothly fresh from the dock. He watched as his destroyer's diamond-shaped prow plunged deeper into the debris field.

Valediction's forward gunners fired sporadic bursts of turbolaser fire, clipping or outright destroying any large chunk of debris that could have gotten in their way.

It would still take them a few minutes to get within firing range of the dreadnaughts, which meant the only thing left to do was wait.

Vernedet settled smoothly beside him. "Have you reported to Admiral Grant yet, sir?"

"Not yet. Wait until the battle's done." He didn't want to think about Grant, not now.

"Very good, sir. He should be pleased."

"Assuming we finish off those last Seps," Pellaeon jabbed a finger at the dreadnaughts. *Salvation* was launching her remaining fighters with the hopes of catching the dreadnaughts, which were probably going to duck behind the moon before either star destroyer got a good shot with her turbolasers.

"Still, we've cleared Syne's people out of the Zhar system," Vernedet said. "The sooner we finish mop-up, the sooner we can go back home."

Pellaeon didn't have to glance at Vernedet to see the hopeful look on his face. The two of them had known each other since naval academy. They'd been two of the youngest and two of the most promising cadets there, and when the Clone Wars broke out they'd made a wager as to who would get command a battle cruiser first.

The intervening years had been taxing for them both, and Vernedet didn't seem to hold it against Pellaeon for getting the captain's pips first. If anything, he seemed pleased that fate had placed them on the same starship. Especially if the starship was as new, sleek, pretty, and fine-smelling as *Valediction.* The past few years had been hell for Pellaeon's personal life, and he was glad to have a man like Vernedet at his side now; friends like that didn't come often.

In a lower voice, Vernedet asked, "Any word from Hallena yet, Gil?"

"Not for a while," Pellaeon admitted.

It had been almost four years since he'd last heard from her. Hallena Devis had been a prized agent for Republic Intelligence, but during the war she'd become disillusioned with her government and left her position. She'd never outright said it in her goodbye letter, but he knew she'd gone off with the group of schismatic Jedi they'd worked with at JanFathal.

What that meant after Order 66 was anyone's guess.

They had been close once, and it pained him to think that political divisions would tear apart of the only relationships

he'd had worth the effort. He had no idea what she thought about Palpatine's new government. He'd kept one ear open for news of Master Djinn Altis' Jedi sect, but nothing had come up, which at least meant they hadn't been hunted down. Of course didn't even know if Hallena was with them anymore. He didn't know anything.

"What about Aylin?" he asked at last. Anything to get his mind off Hallena.

"Safe and sound on Coruscant, last I heard."

"You're lucky, falling for a civilian," Pellaeon said. A little hesitantly, he added, "How *are* things on Imperial Center?"

"No more Seps raining hellfire from the sky. She says people are still tense and all, even though the war's over."

"I'm glad they can tell themselves that." Pellaeon muttered as he watched the dreadnaughts' fighter screens collide with *Salvation*'s squadrons and light up the closing space between ships.

"Some people just don't know when to quit," Vernedet said. "They'd be better off surrendering."

Pellaeon wasn't entirely sure about that. He'd heard differing reports from different people about how the new government was handling Separatists and other combatants who surrendered to the Imperial fleet. Some said the prisoners were treated fairly; others said they were whisked away by unfamiliar Intel agents and never again.

He wondered how much of it had to do with the Jedi. As a naval officer instead of an army one, he hadn't had much opportunity to work directly with the during ground battles, but the ones he *had* worked with had proven admirable, if frustratingly hard to fathom. It still seemed hard to believe that the Jedi could have engineered the entire war as the set-up for a coup against the elected Chancellor Palpatine, but the evidence he'd seen, including recordings from inside Palpatine's office during Mace Windu's attempt on his life, were hard to counter.

He's mulled it over in his mind again and again, and the best conclusion he could think of was that the Jedi leadership had instigated the coup without the knowledge of their soldiers on the ground. Certainly Altis's sect wouldn't have been involved. In that light, Palpatine's wholescale purge of the Jedi Order seemed more than a little excessive.

At the same time, Jedi were super-powered beings beyond the understanding of mortals like Pellaeon or Vernedet, and there was no way to tell which could be trusted and which could not. The Order had always been a strange parallel system, a government within a government, secretive and accountable to noone. Palpatine's methods, ugly as they might have been, were probably the safest way to protect the galaxy from another Jedi coup attempt.

Up ahead, the dreadnaughts were already ducking behind the moon. *Salvation* was adjusting heading to pursue around the moon's planet-side rim while her fighters kept harassing the fleeing ships.

"Sir," Vernedet cleared his throat, "What are your orders?"

"Launch all remaining fighter squadrons. Plot a course that takes us around the moon's outer edge. We'll see if we can cut them off."

"Very good, sir," Vernedet gave a crisp, smart salute and walked back toward the crew pit to relay order.

A moment later, a flight of ARC-170 starfighters shot out from beneath *Valediction*'s pointed nose. On their tails rode a full squadron of V-wings.

Pellaeon's mouth formed a tight, straight line as his vessel shifted course slightly. *Salvation* was rounding the moon as fast as she could. All that was left to do was wait.

He rolled his Z-95 Headhunter close behind a dancing ARC-170 starfighter and dropped his targeting reticule on its flaring red exhaust ports, but A'Sharad Hett hesitated before before taking the easy kill. He wasn't sure if it was

because he'd once flown beside ships like these for years, or because some part of his Jedi training still shirked at taking life.

Whatever it was, it only bothered him for a second. He squeezed the trigger and a single proton torpedo lanced out. It impacted on the ARC fighter's aft shields and exploded. The force of detonation tore through the engines, ignited the fuel storage, and turned the entire ship into a tumbling fireball.

Hett pulled up sharply and veered back toward the two dreadnaughts. There were plenty more enemy fighters left to kill.

As he angled toward *Defiance* and *Iconoclast*, a transmission scratched over his helmet's comlink. "All ships, we are preparing to withdrawal. Repeat, we are preparing to jump to hyperspace. Return to your decks. Repeat, return to your decks!"

Hett glanced at his cockpit's tactical display. It was still another three minutes before either dreadnaught cleared the gravity well, and it would take less than two for the *Venator*-class destroyer to round the moon and begin pounding *Defiance*'s fragile aft section with her turbolasers.

He flicked his comlink to a secure channel and called, "Command, this is Twin Suns Lead. Do you copy?"

After a second, a man's voice responded. "We copy, Twin Lead. Go ahead."

"Yvolton, put Syne on," Hett snapped.

He didn't have time to go with intermediaries. The other fighters were already starting to return to the dreadnaughts, though his own squadron was holding back and awaiting his orders.

"One second." He could hear Yvolton's hesitation. "Here she is."

A cold female voice snapped, "What is it, Twin Suns Lead?"

"*Defiance* is going to need her fighter screen. Let us stay in the air."

"Negative, Lead. Once we clear the grav well we're gone, whether you're on board or not."

"If I get left it's my choice."

"You can't handle it alone, A'Sharad. Get back to base, *now*!"

"Listen, just give us-"

"Wait-" and suddenly the line cut off.

Hett banked his fighter gently toward *Iconoclast*. Syne's flagship was in better shape than *Defiance*, but enemy fighters were still buzzing around her dreadnaught like gnats.

"Lead, I'm picking up bombers headed toward *Defiance*," Twin Suns Three reported.

"Damn," Hett snarled. "Come on, we'll pick them off."

"We've got less than two minutes to get back to the barn," Twin Five reminded him.

"More time than *Defiance* has if we don't get those bombers. Twin Suns, follow me."

He pointed his Headhunter's nose toward the dreadnaught and kicked his engines to full thrust. A few V-wing fighters danced to get out of his way as he charged forward. He squinted into the blackness of space as he approached *Defiance*, searching for whatever ships might be trying to take her down. He wasn't even sure what kind of bombers the Empire was using nowadays; they were rolling out new ships and soldiers at an astounding rate even though the Clone Wars had technically been won for the better part of a year,

He didn't see the ships, but he did see the flare of more than a dozen missiles as they arced toward *Defiance*'s rear engine section. Profanities rippled over the Twin Suns' group comm as *Defiance*'s shields shuddered and collapsed. With impeccable timing, the star destroyer behind it began to rain down volleys of turbolaser fire.

"All fighters, retreat to *Iconoclast!"* Yolvton said over the broadcast channel. "Repeat, all ships fall back to *Iconoclast*! We jump in eighty seconds!"

"Boss," Twin Suns Five said, "The other destroyer just rounded the moon."

This time it was Hett who swore. He checked his scanners and saw the new *Victory*-class star destroyer breaking past the moon's outer ecliptic. It began firing on *Iconoclast*, and washes of green energy rippled over her forward shields.

Iconoclast could probably hold until she escaped the gravity well. *Defiance* didn't stand a chance. Even now, explosive ruptures were tearing through her engine section. Escape pods were shooting out of her hull, probably to be captured by Imperial cleanup crews.

It was a fight he couldn't win. Those were lives he couldn't save. He wanted to scream and pound at the universe itself, but a voice called him off.

"Twin Suns, back to base, *now*!" Yvolton ordered.

He pointed his nose toward *Iconoclast* and jammed the engines. The rest of his squad followed. They pulled into a tight arrowhead formation and whipped past ARC and V-wing fighters without even slowing down. There was a burst of static over his headset as a stray torpedo caught Twin Suns Five and he felt yet another life wink out in the Force, a life that had been his to lead and protect.

For a second, he wondered whether it was worth it to keep flying at all. In this brave new galaxy there was only way a Jedi's life could end. Deep down, he'd known that since his father's death on Tatooine twenty years ago.

Then a voice came over his headset, Syne's herself: "All ships, you have thirty seconds! Land *now*!"

Her voice was all Hett needed.

Iconoclast was coming up fast but he didn't know if they'd make it. The dreadnaught still had the ventral shields down so fighters could slip into her landing bay, but her forward shields were still lit up by the the vicstar's turbolaser fire.

Hett dipped his fighter low and aimed for the bright open docking bay. It grew bigger, bigger, bigger, until it swallowed his Headhunter in its brightness.

"Ten seconds!"

Someone's voice- Yvolton's maybe- buzzed in his headset as he killed his forward thrus engines, fired his repulsors, and tried to find a spot on a broad deck crowded crowded with people and ships. He roared over the heads of the deck crew and a cluster of pilots alighting their spade-faced R-41 Starchasers, then found a spot near the forward bulkhead and dropped his landing struts. His fighter scraped and shuddered as he touched down.

Then everything seemed to lurch forward without moving, and *Iconoclast* fell into hyperspace.

Hett sat in his cockpit without getting out. He took off his battered white helmet with shaking hands. Right before they'd jumped he had felt it: the destruction of *Defiance* and the loss of tens of thousands of lives. One second they had been fires that had burned bravely beside his own. Then they'd winked out and been nothing at all. The loss shuddered through his body and brought a tear to one eye.

Still clasping his helmet in his hands, he screamed inside the soundproof bubble of his cockpit. When his throat had gone raw, he opened the cockpit and wandered out among the survivors.

Valediction's bridge was eerily quiet. Every crewman seemed to be watching the empty space where the last dreadnaught had just been.

Pellaeon cleared his throat and shouted, "All crew, get to work! Repeat, *get to work*! Comm, ask *Salvation* what kind of assistance she needs! Tactical, send out rescue crew to pick up our EV pilots!"

A chorus of 'yes, sirs' ricocheted around the bridge. When everyone was finally back in motion, Pellaeon sighed and turned to face the forward viewport. The first dreadnaught's broken corpse still smoldered and he wondered how long it would take for all the oxygen inside the ship to burn out. He wondered how long it would take for all the crew to die.

Though a part of him felt sorry for them, another part cursed them for dragging on this war as long as they had. If the damned fools would just stop fighting, they could all lay down arms and go back to their families. They could all *find* the families they wanted to go back to.

Vernedet appeared beside him. "Do you want to comm Admiral Grant or should I, sir?"

Pellaeon hadn't even thought of that. Reporting failure to your superior officers was one of the worse parts of command. He suddenly longed to be a grunt ensign who never had to take responsibility for anything

"I'll handle it, Mynar," Pellaeon clapped a hand on his friend's shoulder. "They're going to have us keep chasing them. You can bet on it."

"It does sound likely."

"Then we'd best clean up as fast as we can and get ready to pursue."

He turned and started across the bridge to the private command salon. He had a feeling he'd want to plead for Grant's mercy far from the prying eyes of his crew. As he walked across the clean metal deck, he decided that this shiny new warship had a lot of war left to fight.

As did they all.

The scene aboard *Iconoclast* after the battle was cramped and frantic. The hangar bay was full of fighters recovered from the other dreadnaught, while the hallways were packed with officers moving about, coordinating post-battle damage assessment and trying to take stock of how many personnel had been saved from *Defiance*.

A'Sharad Hett was able to cut through the crowd. He was a large man, tall and broad-shouldered. The dark jagged tattoos that lined his tanned face gave him a fierce appearance, and the twin lightsabers dangling from his belt instantly grabbed beings' attention.

Those things were enough to identify him to every crewman on board *Iconoclast,* and more than his appear-

ance, it was what he *was* that made people shuffle aside in deference, fear, caution, and restrained loathing.

Less than a year ago, he had been their enemy, and neither he nor they could ever forget that.

For months he had served the Republic in battling the fiercely independent settlers scattered across the islands of beautiful, blue Bavinyar. They had allied themselves with the Techno Union, Banking Clan, and Trade Federation separatists less because they trusted Lord Dooku and his minions, and more because the rugged, stubborn people had fled Republic control and established their own colony world a hundred years back and were loathe to surrender an inch to Coruscant.

Then Republic had become Empire in name as well as fact, the Separatist leaders had been slaughtered, and the New Order suddenly had the resources to subdue Bavinyar. Right now, Jereveth Syne's *Iconoclast* was the last remaining capital ship of the Bavinyar Defense Fleet, and though the planet was firmly under its heel, the Empire was determined the stamp out the final renegades.

As for A'Sharad Hett, he might have been the last Jedi in the universe. It made for a strange alliance, but these were strange dark times.

When he reached the bridge he looked around for Syne. She was a small woman but she had a unique capacity to make any room gravitate around her. He did not see her, but one man spotted him from across the bridge and hurried over.

Avit Madrisk was a slim man with a trim brown beard that made him look only a little older than he was. He gave Hett a curt nod and said, “The madam isn't here now. She left the bridge immediately after the battle.”

“Is everything under control here, Captain?” Hett glanced around the bridge. The crew seemed stressed but no longer panicked; cleanup from such an exhausting battle would take time, but at least they no longer had the threat of immediate death looming over them.

"I can handle it," Madrisk said. "I would... suggest you go see to the madam."

Hett nodded. Many of Syne's people were uncomfortable with Hett's relationship with their leader. Hett wasn't entirely comfortable with it himself. *Iconoclast*'s captain, at least, seemed to have no such qualms, and for that Hett was grateful.

Right now he needed any confidence he could get.

He gave Madrisk curt thanks, then turned around and left the bridge. He could feel the muted relief his absence brought to the bridge, and he did not blame them.

Hett made his way down into the habitation decks. These halls were shockingly quiet compared to the ones above, and he went down three corridors to Syne's cabin without encountering a soul.

When he got to her door he knocked three times and waited.

Eventually a voice said, "Enter."

He stepped through the door. The captain's quarters were bare-walled and cramped, with room only for a bed half-receded into the wall and table with two chairs. There were no windows. Only a single overhead light cast illumination on the woman standing in the middle of the room. Long black hair spilled over her shoulder and framed a pale round face. The brown Bavinyar Defense Force uniform she still wore was unbuttoned to the waist. Her face, pretty but stuck in a habitual scowl, seemed to sag and her dark eyes were bloodshot.

The door hissed shut behind Hett. He didn't step closer. He clenched hands into fists at his side and said, "I'm sorry, Madam. There wasn't anything to be done for *Defiance*."

"Of course not," Syne sneered. "The Imps had us outmanned and outgunned. Their warships are brand new and ours are breaking down. *Defiance* was doomed. That's why I told you to fall back."

"I did fall back."

"Not when I told you to." She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and stared at him.

"I thought I might have been able to save *Defiance*."

"You couldn't. I knew you couldn't."

"I thought-" He stopped, sighed, shook his head. "I wanted to save *lives*, damn it. I had to try."

"Of course. Saving people is your purpose. You are a *Jedi*," she said the word like a curse. All the Bavinyari did. To them, the Jedi had been symbols of the Republic they'd long sought to escape. In the beginning, Syne's cold pragmatism had been all that prevented the other Bavinyari from lynching their Jedi prisoner or handing him over to the Empire.

It wasn't the only reason anymore, but Hett still felt the need to be useful to the people who'd taken him on.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"I don't know." She turned her head down. Her hair spilled forward and shadows fell over her face.

"We can meet up with the other ships."

"Of course." She laughed bitterly. "A handful of frigates and corvettes will help us *greatly* the next time the Empire catches up to us."

"You could surrender." He took a step forward.

"Never," she looked up at him. "We are the last holdouts of Bavinyar. When they have us they will make an example of us."

"Perhaps." He took another step, putting her in arm's reach. She tilted her head to look up at him but didn't flinch.

She knew what he implied. She was no fool. She could offer the Empire a gift-wrapped Jedi in exchange for amnesty. Any smart resistance leader in her position would be considering it. Half of *Iconoclast*'s crew was probably wondering why she hadn't done it already.

"No," she said, answering his unspoken question.

"Why?"

"You *know* why."

"If you want to save lives-"

"Only a fool would trust the Emperor to honor his deals. He's broken too many promises to count already. That's what I've told Avit, and Andrein, and Sajin, and all the others."

"Have all of them asked?"

"No," she exhaled. "They are too... loyal to question my judgment. But I see it in their eyes."

She saw her own doubts reflected in them. He didn't need the Force to know that.

"It's still an option." Hett took another step closer.

"Never. Surrender is death."

It was, thought Hett, the only thing he and Syne's people really had in common, but it was enough for them to put aside old hatreds.

He reached out and placed a hand on either shoulder. They felt small and bony under his large hands. She tilted her head back, spilling harsh pale light on a soft pale face. When he couldn't restrain himself any longer he bent low and kissed her on thin, dry lips.

They tumbled and wrestled their way over to the bunk. Pent-up energy and frustration from the battle finally found outlet. Hett tossed her onto the bunk and into shadow, then quickly dove down after her onto a brittle bed.

Passion was one of the things he'd been taught to avoid as a Jedi. It had always been hard for him, just as it had been hard for his father, who had fled the Jedi Order to become a Tusken tribesman on Tatooine. A'Sharad had been a teenager when he saw his father and his whole Tusken family die; it was a grief he'd never truly conquered. The loss of his adopted Jedi family had been almost as hard.

Now the Jedi were gone, and so were there rules. It was a strange thing, no longer having to hide from yourself. Sometimes he felt like a confused child, and other times he felt old with bitter wisdom. Right now he fell into the dark with Syne, desperate and confused but without hesitation.

A'Sharad Hett no longer knew if he was a Jedi. The Order seemed extinct, and rather than being the last of an old race

he more often felt he his own creature, unique and alone. Perhaps he always had been. He'd come to understand that in the long, awful months since the fall of the Republic and the birth of a horrible New Order.

He didn't know what he was now, and less what he would become in the future, but he knew he was going to find out.

3

"When Order 66 came down, it was a moment of chaos when anything could have happened. My brothers Atin and Corr manages to escape to Mandalore in the confusion. Niner and your father got left behind. It could have easily been the other way around. But there's something you should remember about your father, not matter what happened later. Niner got trapped on Coruscant and Darman stayed behind with him. He could have run, but he wouldn't abandon his brother. Always remember that."

Everything had changed forever, and everyone kept on pretending that it hadn't.

When you walked around the streets of Coruscant (and that was what the civvies still called Triple Zero, not Imperial Center, not unless some Imp functionary was breathing down their necks), everyone still went about their daily routines. Business-beings walked around in crisp suits and attended meetings. Couples strolled arm-in-arm at night, giggled, and whispered things into each others' ears. News reporters on the HoloNet spoke with smiles about Separatist holdouts getting smashed and hurried through the news about disasters on Gibadan and now Caamas like they had some place better to be. At first there'd been some small protests, but the sit-ins and banners had been cleared out of the government district months ago. Almost everybody on the planet seemed intent on stubbornly repeating their life as it had been, as though that was enough to deny the staggering changes rippling through the galaxy.

In his own way, Niner was guilty of that same denial. He knew that, but he also knew he needed that denial on some level, and so did all those happy couples. It was the only way to get through the day without going mad.

When his squad wasn't on missions with the 501st's specialized Jedi-hunting detachment, Niner followed the same strict routing he always had, even before Order 66. He woke up early, went to the gym, did his sets, showered, changed clothes, went down to the mess hall to eat. When that was done he went to practice at the live-fire shooting range. After that he did another set of exercises, low-intensity. Then he went to the mess hall and ate again.

It would have been better if he had some reliable companionship to take to the gym or the mess, but there was no such luck. After poor Ennen slotted himself for shooting a civvie playacting as a Jedi, Niner's squad was down to three: himself, Darman, and the year-old Spaarti-grown clone called Rede.

Niner tried not to be prejudiced against Spaarti clones, but sometimes he found himself falling into the same way of thinking about them that mongrels thought about regular clones. The young man (they were about the same age biologically, but he was still *young*) seemed strangely hollow sometimes, like he reacted to certain things in certain ways not because he actually felt anything but because he wanted to please his audience. Sometimes it felt like there was nothing behind his polite smile and his good aim; just a void waiting to receive instructions, like a droid.

And then there was Darman. Dar was his brother, but that didn't make things easier. Sometimes the man seemed like a stranger. All clones had to deal, deep down, with the knowledge that they'd been bred and lived and died for someone else's purpose, and that from their very inception they'd been denied the choices of normal beings. His brothers handled it in their own ways: Fi had clung to this sentimental yearning for a *real life*, while Corr buried his emotions beneath layers of snark and cynicism. Niner was

good at compartmentalizing; most days he simply didn't think about it. As for Dar, his wife Etain's death had unlocked something inside of him that Niner had never seen. All that buried anger at the universe had come to the front and it had found its focus: the Jedi. Revenge was all Dar could think about now.

Because neither Darman nor Rede made for good companionship, Niner had to seek out others. He'd taken to lunching with Delta Squad, or at least the three surviving members of what had once been called such. In their own ways, Boss, Fixer, and Scorch were clearly hurting from loss too. Their sniper, Sev, had gone MIA at Kashyyyk. They didn't even know whether he was alive or dead, but it had been nearly a year since then and by now even Walon Vau had given up searching for him.

Losing Sev had clearly changed the Deltas. They'd always been more gung-ho about serving the Republic than the Omegas and less misty-eyed about their Mando heritage, but like all clone squads they were a tight-knit group, and losing their brother they'd known all their lives had rattled Sorch, Fixer, and even Boss to the core.

They still talked about doing their duty to the Empire, exterminated the Sep and Jedi menace, and all the rest, but it was clear their hearts weren't in it. Their wisecracks and jokes had gone beyond typical soldiers' cynicism to betray a deeper mistrust of the people who had sent Sev off to die.

In a perverse way Niner enjoyed being with the old Deltas because their loss reminded him that, despite everything awful that had happened, all his brothers from Omega Squad were still alive, and half of them were free and safe with *Kal'buir* on Mandalore.

Sometimes their squad's fourth member, a long-time 501st soldier named Joc, ate with them, but that morning he was elsewhere. Niner was glad; Joc seemed like a good man, but he didn't understand the Mando bond that held Delta and Omega together. He certainly didn't know about their old sergeants and squadmates on Mandalore.

The dining hall was noisy at midday and Niner was seated with the Deltas at a corner table. They picked a different spot at random every day and he surreptitiously felt the table's underside for bugs. He found nothing, and if there were other listening devices in the room, they'd never pick his voice out of the hall's clamor.

"You are properly paranoid," Scorch commented as Niner gestured for them to lean close, but not close enough that they looked like a bunch of devious conspirators.

"Comes with the life he leads," said Fixer. "Good thing our Sergeant Vau doesn't care about us like Skirata does for his boys."

"Vau cares," Niner said in a low voice. "He spent months trying to find Sev."

Boss let a little frown crease his hard face. "Is he still on Mandalore?"

Niner nodded.

"When was the last you talked to them?"

Boss knew Niner had a special comlink that patched him into Mandalore. Tucked inside his helmet, it was a special gift from Jaing and Mereel. "A few weeks. They call me, but I can't call them. More secure that way."

Darman had told him he was planning to go to Mandalore, ostensibly on a mission, and then desert. It had sounded good to Niner but the way Dar was lately, it was hard to know what was real or delusion. Dar had said Captain Melusar had okayed the mission, but nothing had happened since then. If Niner had *known* they'd be outbound to Mandalore he would have told his brothers, but right now he knew nothing for sure. He didn't want to get hopes up, theirs or his.

Clearly it showed on his face. Fixer said, "You still want to skip, don't you?"

"My brothers are there," Niner grunted. "And so are yours."

Boss shook his head. "We have a job to do here."

"You know *Kal'buir* would welcome you. So'd Vau."

"Maybe they would. But who would clean up all those Jedi running around?"

Scorch didn't budge; neither did Fixer. A year ago they'd all been adamant about staying; the Deltas had only one foot into the Mando culture that had ensnared the Omegas and Nulls thanks to Skirata. Declarations of loyalty had since gone hollow. Niner had watched it happen, step by step, as they'd been forced to accept that Sev was never coming back, and that the government they served wasn't even pretending to care about their missing brother. Sev was war materiel, expendable, just like the rest of them.

Still, desertion was never easy. Their Kaminoan masters had alternately bred and beaten loyalty into them. Niner knew that as well as anyone; like Boss, he was the sarge, he'd clung to loyalty hardest, and he'd been the last Omega to really accept the idea of running.

Niner had one more lure to dangle in front of them. Lowering his voice even more, he said, "*Kal'buir* might be close to restoring our normal aging process."

That got attention; even Boss's eyes went wide.

Scorch slapped on his typical skepticism. "How does *that* work? I thought Ko Sai's research was a dead end."

Niner was willing to tell Delta some things, but he wasn't going to say that Skirata had scrounged up a thousand-year-old Kaminoan Jedi, or any other Jedi for that matter.

"*Bard'ika* busted a scientist out of jail. Dr. Uthan, you remember her?" It wasn't even a lie.

"Yeah, the one who was cooking up a batch to kill all us clones," Fixer said. "How can Skirata trust her, even with a gun to her head?"

"She was from Gibadan," Niner said simply.

Everyone went quiet. Scorch looked down at his tray, stabbed his fork into a slice of nerf thigh, and said, "Well, good luck to her, then."

"I'll keep you informed," Niner muttered.

"Thanks for that," Fixer said. He suddenly shifted his gaze over Niner's head and called out, "Joc, over here!"

Niner turned around to see the squad's new addition coming up behind them with a tray in both hands.

"Good to see you, Sarge," Joc said as he sat down beside Niner. "Sorry I'm late. Had to see the doc this morning."

"Is something wrong?" Niner asked.

"Nothing too bad. Just strained a muscle yesterday."

"You're pushing yourself too hard, *Joc'ika*," Fixer grinned. Niner was surprised to hear the *Mando'a* diminutive for a man who had nothing to do with Mandos.

"Yeah, well, I have to catch up with you lot," Joc glanced at Niner. "I took a stray Sep round on Utapau, was out of commission for a while."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Don't be, I made out better than the rest of my squad," Joc shook his head. "Wasn't a bad wound either. Just a flesh wound, right in the *shebs* as you boys would say."

Niner liked Joc; he'd seen a lot more action than Rede and had a lot more personality. He just didn't *trust* Joc.

"By the way," Joc said, "Is Darman going to catch up?"

He didn't know Darman's whole story; the Deltas hadn't shared that much.

Niner said, "I think he's on his own schedule. Why?"

"I don't know. I just heard Holy Roly called him in for a talk."

Niner nearly dropped his fork. "Today?"

"Less than an hour ago. He might still be in there." Joc shrugged and started eating.

Captain Melusar calling Darman meant one of two things. Either they were going to Mandalore very soon, or they weren't going at all.

Niner didn't feel like eating anymore, but he shovelled stuff into his mouth, smiled, and laughed when Joc or Fixer cracked a joke. He listened to everything they said but he didn't hear a word.

Darman was seated in front of Roly Melusar, looking at the captain's thin pale face from across the black-topped

expanse of his desk, but he wanted to leap up to his feet and punch the air and shout, he didn't know what. Instead he sat there with his hands clasping the sides of the chair, trying to dam up the anxiety and anticipation that was ready to burst.

"I'm sincerely sorry for the delay," Melusar was saying. "There are certain other ops on the horizon that the Five-oh-First may be put to use for. The timetable is still somewhat vague, which is why I took it upon myself to make the call regarding your proposed mission to Mandalore."

There was a slight pause, an opening for response. All Darman could say was, "Yes, sir." His voice seemed to rattle inside his helmet.

Melusar gave the tiniest nod. "Tell me, do you have the specific location of where the alleged Jedi hiding on the planet can be found?"

"No, sir. I've never even been to Mandalore. But I know they're there."

"And tell me, are they in the company of a former GAR training sergeant named Kal Skirta?"

Darman's body stiffened. It wouldn't have taken much for Melusar to find out that Dar and Niner's training sergeant had been Skirata. He already knew that Atin and Corr were listed as deserters, and that Skirata himself had a reputation as a wild card even when he was working for the GAR.

"Skirata is no friend of the Jedi." He'd almost said *Kal'buir*. "He hates, them actually."

"Really?" Melusar leaned forward. "Why is that?"

"Well, Mandalorians and Jedi have bad blood, sir. Beyond that, he thinks *all* Force-users are no good. He says they drag other beings into their wars and power struggles and never care about little people like us clones who have to suffer and die 'cos of them. He sounds a little like you, sir."

It was true, and despite it all, Skirata was still sheltering three Jedi under his roof, including Zey himself. It was still

unreal to Darman, and he was half-convinced that they were playing some crazy Force-powered mind tricks on *Kal'buir*. Whatever the reason, he knew he had to get into Mandalore and save his son- from the Jedi, and anyone they'd compromised.

Melusar drummed thin fingers on the desktop. “You believe Skirata can help you locate the Jedi?”

“That's right.”

“Darman, you should know that Kal Skirata is a wanted man, both by the Empire and by other Mandalorians. According to our garrison there he's run afoul of some local faction called the Death Watch.”

Darman knew the name. Skirata and Vau alike had considered them slimy *hutuune* who'd betrayed Jaster Mereel and nearly destroyed all of Mandalorian society. The fact that Skirata and Vau agreed on something meant it must have been true.

“I don't know much about Mandalore, sir, like I've said. I've never even been there.”

“I understand that. Nonetheless, I'm sure you have some emotional attachment to your old sergeant, don't you?”

There was no use in trying to lie. He countered with a truth. “I do, sir. But there are more important things on Mandalore than Skirata. My job is to get you those Jedi and I will.”

Melusar could have prodded him a dozen different ways. He could have asked how Darman knew about the hidden Jedi in the first place. He could have asked about Corr and Atin and the Nulls. Instead he just stared with those cold pale eyes, and Darman had no idea how to read him

Finally, Melusar said, “When you arrive in Mandalore's orbit, I assume you'll try to contact Skirata's people.”

Again, there was no point in holding onto a lie. He nodded.

“Get the location of the Jedi *immediately*, before you do anything else,” Melusar said. Darman felt a bit of breath seep out of him. “After that, contact the garrison and give

them the coordinates. Whoever gets to the site first gets the Jedi."

His throat was suddenly dry. "Alive or dead, sir?"

"Kill them," Melusar said with finality.

Some officers wanted to take Jedi prisoners, but not Holy Roly. He was on a mission of pious genocide.

Darman had killed a Jedi before. He was pretty sure he could kill Zey, assuming he got the drop on his old general. After what he'd put Etain through, the Jedi Master certainly deserved it, but despite what Darman had told Melusar, killing the Jedi wasn't his top priority. Getting *Kad'ika* out was. He figured he could drop onto Kyrimorut, wherever that was, grab his son, warn Skirata, and get his *shebs* out of there before the garrison or Death Watch showed up.

He was a commando, one of the best. He could do that. He had to. It was the only way to save his son. He couldn't rely on anyone else, not even his *buir*.

"I'll do exactly as you say, sir."

"And what do you want in return?"

Darman's breath caught. Melusar knew a lot, but he couldn't know about Kad. He *couldn't*. There was no way.

The captain shook his head. "I'm sorry, Darman, but I can't call off the warrant on Skirata. I don't have the authority. And frankly, he's a dangerous man and a threat to the Empire."

Darman could barely hide his relief. "I know, sir. Still, I was hoping that, just this once, you might look the other way...."

"I won't break the law to protect your old sergeant, Darman. However, if we do, in fact, bag all three Jedi, I *might* be able to justify his slipping away. Jedi are a bigger prize than Skirata. But I'll only do it once."

"Thank you so much, sir," he exhaled.

Melusar gave Darman an appraising look. "I know this is going to be a very personal mission for you, Darman. That's why I'm insisted Niner and Rede go along."

"I know, sir." He tried a smile. "Always want backup when hunting Jedi anyway."

"Quite." Melusar clacked his fingers on more time. "We're preparing a hyperspace-capable blastboat that will get you to Mandalore. The three of you ship out at 0800 tomorrow morning. Understood?"

Darman shot to his feet and snapped a salute. "Sir! Yes, sir!"

Melusar waved toward the door. "Dismissed."

Darman felt like sprinting down the hall, but he restrained himself to fast, long, straight strides.

He got to the locker room, hoping to find Niner there, but instead he found Rede. The young man was sitting on the bench in front of his open locker, sorting through a case of partially-used power packs for his DC-17 blaster rifle. Darman's boots squeeked on the polished floor as he slid to a halt.

Rede's head snapped up. "Is there a problem?"

"No," Darman exhaled. "Not at all. I just talked to Captain Melusar." No 'Holy Roly,' no nicknames, no jokes, not with Rede.

"Do we have a mission?"

"That's right." Darman stared at the open space on the bench next to Rede for a second before taking it. The other man shifted slightly to one side.

Niner didn't like Rede; he'd never said as much but Darman could tell. He thought Spaarti clones were strange, aloof, a little closer to droids than men, but that was how mongrels through of clones and Darman had resolved not to treat Rede the way he'd been treated. He'd also resolved not treat Rede like Bry and Ennen, two good men who'd been brought into the squad to replace Corr and Atin. Dar and Niner had kept them at arm's length because they *weren't* Corr and Atin, and now both of them were dead and there was no way to make up for that neglect.

Darman wasn't going to make that mistake, not again, so he prodded Rede.

"Do you want to know where we're going?"

"Of course."

"We're going to Mandalore," he said. "We're going to bag ourselves some Jedi."

"Mandalore?" Rede blinked. "Strange place for Jedi to hide."

"That's probably why they went there."

"Who else is coming? Boss's squad?"

"No. Just you, me, and Niner. Captain Melusar's fixed us up with a blastboat. We leave early tomorrow, so you'd better get good rack time tonight."

Rede nodded. "Do we know how many Jedi?"

"Three."

"And do we know where they are?"

"Not yet. We've got local contacts who will fill us in when we get to Mandalore."

"Ah. There's a new garrison there, right?"

"And their allies, yes," He didn't know why he was trying to be honest with Rede when he was about to stab him in the back. He'd probably be furious when he learned why Darman was really going to Mandalore, though it was hard to picture Rede as hopping mad.

"Your training sergeant was from Mandalore, wasn't he?" asked Rede.

Darman nodded. He had a careful line to walk now.

"Do you know much about the planet?" Rede asked.

"No. I've never been."

"But you've been curious?"

Darman blinked. "Why would you think that?"

"Well, I know that Niner and you had a close bond with your training sergeant, like Boss's squad had with theirs."

Close might not have been the term for Walon Vau's relationship with his boys, but Darman let that pass. "We picked up some things from him, sure. The swears, mostly, but you knew that."

"Exactly. I thought it might be strange for you, finally seeing this place you've heard about for years." Rede tried

a smile but it came out a frown. “I'm not much more than a year old, so it'd hard for me to wrap my head around.”

Darman stared at that face, so like his own, but smoother and somehow simpler. Niner was wrong; Rede and the other Spaarti clones weren't hollow, they were *babies*. After less than twelve standard months of life they had blaster rifles shoved into their hands and were sent off to murder and die. What had happened to Darman and his brothers was awful and inhuman; what had happened to Rede was even worse.

He put a hand on the man's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Try not to think about it too much. I won't. This is just one mission. We're going in, bagging us some dirty Jedi, and getting out. Should be a piece of rhyscate.”

“Rhyscate?” Rede frowned.

“It's a cake. Kind of like chocolate. Really, really dark...” Darman blew a sigh. “It's something I'll treat you to when all this is done.”

“I'll looked forward to it.”

“Look forward to what?” A voice said behind them.

Dar jumped to his feet; he couldn't help it, his nerves were still on edge and he had a ton of pent-up energy. Niner stood in the locker room's doorway, a question on his lips but knowledge in his eyes.

“We're going to Mandalore,” Darman held that gaze. “All three of us. We ship out tomorrow morning. Oh-eight-hundred.”

“Well,” Niner said evenly, “We'd better get ready. Right, Rede?”

“Of course, Sarge,” the child nodded.

Darman didn't look away from his brother. Niner thought they were going to betray the Empire, and you could tell from the look in his eyes that it would be hard for him. Even after all the abuse they'd taken, Niner was still full of duty and responsibility and loyalty. He was the good sergeant, even if most of his squad was gone.

It hurt Darman to know that he was going to betray Niner, just like he was going to betray Rede, who'd never get to try that slice of rhyscate. Worst of all, he was going to betray *Kal'buir*, and that knowledge was more painful than anything except Etain's death.

He'd try and make it up to them later somehow, when all the Jedi were dead and his family was safe from their influence. He didn't know when that day would come and he didn't know if his family would take him back after what he was about to do to them.

But it didn't matter. Brothers, fathers, comrades-in-arms, none of them counted more than this son.

4

"The Empire is a strange beast. It was created by the ruthless machinations and incredible vision of one man. At the same time, it functions only through the participation of billions of beings. Some are wicked, some try to be good, and most are just trying to get through the day with their skins intact. In that sense, it's a lot like the Old Republic, or any other government. If, somehow, Palpatine does get what he deserves one day, the government that replaces him is going to have the same combination. What matters is the proportion of ingredients in the mix."

Vice Admiral Octavian Grant was reduced to a shrunken, blurred, and flickering hologram, but he still intimidated Gilad Pellaeon. Somehow the holo actually made it worse; in person Grant was a pale, thin man half a head shorter than Pellaeon himself, with mannerisms some called foppish and others effeminate. The dislocation of light-years stole any sense of physical superiority the captain might have felt and instead left him to face Grant's sharp tongue and quick mind unaided by any minor ego booster.

"You're to be commended for your efforts, Captain," Grant said in that lilting aristocratic accent of his that made everything sound like mocking condescension.

"Thank you very much, sir," Pellaeon dipped his head into a bow. His hands were clasped behind his ramrod-straight back. He'd locked himself away in his personal office for this call and had left explicit orders not to be disturbed.

“These 'Bavinyar Avengers,' as they call themselves, have been removed as a formidable threat in this sector,” Grant continued. “Nonetheless, one ship escaped, and that *is* disturbing.”

“Yes, sir. It’s an old ship, sir. It came off the same production line as the old Katana Fleet dreadnaughts.”

The slave circuits that allowed those ships to be remote-controlled had malfunctioned, turning the whole Katana force into a ghost fleet. Remaining ships from that line had been sold off cheaply to minor planets like Bavinyar.

Grant said, “What disturbs me more is that this ship is commanded by Jereveth Syne herself. You are familiar with the Syne family, aren't you?”

“They were one of the ruling families of the Bavinyar colonists, sir.”

“*Were* is the proper word, yes. Her father fought hard to defend the planet but we got him in the end. The daughter slipped through our grasp when we took the planet, though not for lack of trying. The young lady was raised to fight wars, Captain Pellaeon, and I have no doubt she'll fight this one until the end.”

“What kind of damage do you think she can do with one dreadnaught and a few support ships, sir?”

“She'll most likely limit herself to hit-and-run attacks. I can say from experience that Gregor Syne fought with the methods he had available, no matter how... uncivil.”

Civility was a big word with Grant, along with *duty* and especially *nobility*. Grant was Tapani Sector nobility himself and he had a reputation of looking down on anyone without blue blood. Gregor Syne had been the closest to nobility the notoriously libertarian Bavinyari had, a descendant of the original lead settler from a century back, and Pellaeon wondered if that was responsible for the tone of grudging respect in the admiral's voice.

“Do you think she'll go after civilian targets, Admiral?”

“I think that's very possible, Captain. Unfortunately, that also makes her very difficult to defend against. We should

be thankful she doesn't have any interdictors in her rag-tag fleet."

"We could increase defense on our supply convoys."

"We could, but that would require taking ships away from our command post at Farstine," Grant talked like he was instructing a small child.

"I know, sir," Pellaeon swallowed. "Nonetheless, it may be the difference between saving or losing a convoy."

"My current plan, Captain, is to have select combat vessels deployed at key points between hyperspace lanes. They would be able to jump and help if and when they receive distress signals from convoys under attack. Instead of wasting ships on every supply line we'll be able to respond to danger when it arises.

His tone brooked no argument, and in truth, Pellaeon had none to give. They wouldn't be able to react to attacks right away, but it was a good way to conserve resources and manpower and still react to the threat Syne presented.

"Is there a position you want *Valediction* to hold, Admiral? Or would you prefer we fall back to Farstine?"

"The plan is still being finalized. However, expect a transmission within six hours on my personal encryption frequency. You'll have your instructions."

"Very good, Admiral."

"Quite. Hold your position until then. Sector Command, out."

His hologram abruptly flickered off. Pellaeon stood in front of the console, half-afraid the holo was going to jump to life again, but it didn't. Grant was done with him, as best he could tell, and that meant he could relax his spine and breath again. It took a little effort, but he did just that.

He decided he needed to talk to Lieutenant Vernedet.

They met in Pellaeon's personal quarters. Like the captain's office, the captain's living space aboard these new *Victory*-class ships had almost twice as much floor space as their equivalents on an *Acclamator*-class like his first command. Pellaeon didn't generally care for the amenities

of rank and title, and had refused a personal chef here just as he had on *Leveler*. He tried to eat meals in the mess hall with the other soldiers as often as possible, but times like this made him glad to have a fully-functioning private kitchen.

Vernedet was actually a better cook than Pellaeon was, and that evening the lieutenant prepared an excellent Corellian beef stew. Back at the Judicial Academy Vernedet gained some renown in the barracks for his culinary talents. His ability to provide escape from daily bland cafeteria food had made him popular, but he and Pellaeon had bonded more through their shared homeworld. Having a fellow cadet who could cook was one thing; it was another to have one who could cook a meatloaf just like the one his parents had made on Corellia.

Pellaeon was glad to have good food to take his mind of off things, and even gladder to split the bottle of red Raltiirian wine he'd picked up right before transferring to *Valediction* to take command.

Once the beef stew was digesting slowly in his stomach, and the wine bottle two-thirds empty, Pellaeon told his first officer, “We should be getting new orders from Admiral Grant in an hour or two.”

“I was wondering when you were going to bring that up,” Vernedet said.

The man had surely been wondering about it the entire dinner, but he'd known his captain long enough to tell when not to intrude.

Pellaeon took a gulp of wine and emptied his glass. Instead of pouring more he placed the glass on the tabletop and folded his hands over his full stomach.

“It's about Syne, of course. She's almost certainly going to move to hit-and-run tactics. She knows she can't free her homeworld with just one ship, and she won't surrender either, so she'll pound vulnerable targets and harass us for as long as she can.”

“It doesn't seem like much of an end game.”

"No, it isn't, but it's all she can do."

"You don't think she can be induced to surrender?"

"She won't give in to the people who killed her father. I don't think she'd hesitate to start targeting civilian supply vessels."

Vernedet frowned. "Those kind of attacks can be very difficult to counter. What does the admiral have planned?"

"He thinks it will strain our resources too much to babysit every convoy moving through the sector, and he's probably right. He's going to assign us locations to wait that are close to multiple transit corridors. When Syne attacks, we'll be able to respond quickly."

"But not as quickly as if we were guarding the convoys personally."

"As I said, it's all we can do."

"Of course." Vernedet took another drink. "I was really hoping the last battle would be the end of it."

"We all were," Pellaeon sighed.

"Of course, even if we had taken out Syne, they might have just shuffled us someplace else. It's amazing how many Seps haven't been told the war's over."

"Oh, they've been told. It's just mad them fight harder. The Separatist leaders, who used droids for their fighting, they all surrendered quickly. It's the little people like Syne, the petty planetary rebels, that latched onto the Confederacy, they're the problem."

"They're not like the Trade Federation or the Techno Union. They're much worse. They actually *believe* in something."

Pellaeon frowned. "Maybe. But so do we."

"Thank the heavens for that." Vernedet raised his glass in a little toast. "I just wished that *something* let me get back to Triple Zero. I just got a message from Aylin."

"How is she?" Pellaeon asked. Vernedet was a family man, the kind they put on posters along with his pretty respectable wife and cute child. He tried not to envy his friend for it.

"She's doing well. She says things are pretty calm in Galactic, ah, *Imperial* City."

"And your son?"

"Sol's still crawling around." A wistful smile settled on Vernedet's face. "She sends me holos but it's not the same as being there."

"I can imagine."

Vernedet gave a long sigh. "I wouldn't admit this to anyone else, Gil, but sometimes I think about resigning. Just quitting and going back home."

"They might not let you."

Truth be told, he felt near-certain that Vice Admiral Grant wouldn't allow it. The man was ambitious; once the Bavinyar situation finally settled he'd probably find more hold-outs somewhere to beat into submission.

"I know." Vernedet took a gulp of wine. "But maybe it's for the best. If I quit, who'd take care of you, Captain?"

"I can take care of myself, *Lieutenant*, thank you very much."

"I'll have to take your words for it." Vernedet reached forward and grabbed the wine-bottle by its neck. "Want any more?"

"We'll split it." Pellaeon held up his glass and Vernedet smoothly poured out even half-cups.

Settling back in his chair, the lieutenant said, "I am grateful for one thing. I'm glad we haven't had to deal with any of those Jedi."

Pellaeon took a sip of wine and didn't say a thing, but Vernedet could read his expression. "You can be honest with me, Gil. I know you have a little, let's say, soft spot..."

"It's not that." Pellaeon shook his head. "The Jedi Order tried to overthrow the legitimate government. It needs to be disbanded and its leaders need to be punished. I won't argue that. It's just..."

"It's harder for you," Vernedet said. "You've actually fought with them. I've heard other officers who served with Jedi have been... conflicted."

"I know my duty. I won't hesitate to do it. It's just that the Jedi I fought with had nothing to do with Yoda. They were a splinter group and didn't even *like* that little green dwarf. I'm certain they had no part in the coup attempt. They shouldn't have to be punished for it." He didn't tell Vernedet that he thought Hallena might still be with them. That was a secret he didn't dare speak aloud, even to his best friend.

"Well, like I said, we've been lucky. We haven't run into any Jedi and hopefully we never will." He took another sip of wine. "I spent the whole war hearing stories, from you and other people, about what amazing warriors the Jedi are, how they can clear an entire ship of Seps without even breaking a sweat. When I heard they turned traitor, do you know what my first thought was?"

"What?"

"I thought, oh kark, I don't want to have to fight those guys!" Vernedet laughed. There was more wine than warmth in it. "So I'll count my blessings."

Pellaeon had another mouthful. All that was left in his glass was a rosy sheen curving at the bottom. He pondered getting a bottle of something else from his small but well-stocked liquor cabinet. With all that food settling in his stomach, the wine wasn't having quite the effect he'd hoped for.

His personal comlink buzzed in his pocket. He put the glass down, fumbled for the link, and brought it to his mouth. "This is the captain. Report."

"Captain Pellaeon, we have an encrypted message from Admiral Grant. Should I patch it through to your quarters?"

"Negative. I'll be on the bridge in five minutes." Pellaeon pushed out of his chair and tugged his uniform tight over his swollen stomach. "Thanks for the meal, Mynar. I hope you don't mind cleaning up."

"Not at all. Do what you have to, Captain."

Pellaeon nodded and looked down at the wine glass. He scooped it up and downed a disappointing half-mouthful.

Then he hurried out of his room and up to the bridge, thankful for that one little piece of calm.

The nebula had no name aside from some alpha-numeric garble Republic astronomers had given it centuries ago. It lay close to no major transit routes. It had no asteroids with valuable minerals and its gases had no interesting magnetic properties aside from a tendency to play havoc with ships' electronic and thermal sensors. It was, in short, a good place to hide one dreadnaught and a motley assortment of frigates, pickets, and gunships that were all that remained of the Bavinyar Defense Fleet. Also to its credit, its swirl of silver, white, and blue stardust made for quite a view.

A'Sharad Hett didn't like hiding, pretty view or not, and he knew Jereveth Syne didn't either. As they stood in the tactical room aft of *Iconoclast*'s main bridge and studied the holographic star-chart, she had her arms crossed over her chest and her hands clawing into her biceps through the brown fabric of her shirt. Her black hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail but a few thin strands fell across the pale curves of her face.

Hett was captivated by those tiny lines, dark against light. They were fighting for their lives against the Empire, and the situation was more dire than ever before, but he was staggered again and again by the little things: the way her hair fell, the way her ful lips pressed flat in concentration, the way she tilted her head slightly in thought. He was a man nearing middle age, maybe the last Jedi in the galaxy, but sometimes he felt as overwhelmed as a teenage boy.

As he watched Syne study the tactical readout he wondered, as he did increasingly lately, whether Master Yoda and the Jedi Council hadn't made a fatal error in forbidding the Jedi to take lovers. The desire for companionship, for warm touches and a warm bed and eventually for progeny, were preprogrammed into most beings, and no amount of Jedi training could overcome that entirely.

They said attachment was the gateway to the Dark Side but Hett had never believed that; his own father was proof against it. He knew Syne brought out feelings in him that could be considered strong and even dangerous- certainly they disrupted the Jedi calm he'd been taught to foster- but without those feelings he doubted he'd have the strength to go on fighting a war he knew could not be won. He wondered sometimes if his father hadn't felt the same for his mother on Tatooine.

"Madam Syne," Avit Madrisk cleared his throat, "Your thoughts?"

The captain jarred Syne and Hett both from their reveries. Hett looked around the table: Madrisk stood between him and Syne. On Syne's other flank was her aide, Sajin Nevaleen, a young woman with blue eyes and curly blond hair. To Hett she looked perpetually out of place on a military vessel, but Syne trusted her implicitly. Finally, there was Syne's tactical advisor, Adrein Yvolton, a tall graying man with a good twenty years on Hett. Yvolton had been a chief advisor to Syne's father Gregor, and had passed his allegiance onto the daughter after the parent was killed during Admiral Grant's last attack on Bavinyar.

Syne's eyes passed around the room. They didn't linger on Hett and like a stupid schoolboy he felt hurt.

She said, "They'll be on their guard. They'll probably be expecting us to launch hit-and-run attacks on supply convoys coming in and out of Farstine, Yantor, and nearby systems. Naturally, we'll do the unexpected."

"And what unexpected thing may that be, Madam?" Yvolton asked.

Syne reached out and tapped a brown dot in the center of the map. "We'll launch an attack at Farstine."

Sajin paled but didn't say anything. Madrisk was more forthright. "Madam, with all due respect, that's madness."

Syne gave him a dryly amused look. "Do go on, Avit."

He counted off on his fingers. "One, they'll have most of the ships in this sector based on Farstine. Two, it's at a

central nav point so they'll be able to bring in backup fast. Three, they've got at least one interdictor cruiser at Farstine, which means they'll be able to trap every ship we bring and smash us to pieces."

Syne raised an eyebrow. "Anything else?"

"I think that about covers it, Madam."

"Well, at least you understand why Grant won't expect us to hit there."

Madrisk looked to Yvolton. "Sir, tell her this is crazy. Please?"

Yvolton considered the tactical holo. "I presume the madam had a method to her madness?"

"Will we feint to draw off forces to another locale?" Hett suggested.

They all gave him looks except for Syne. He knew none of them were comfortable with Syne's inviting him into their inner circle, and for what it was worth, he wasn't comfortable being there either, but if he was going to be there he might as well make suggestions.

"Grant's no fool," Syne said. "He'd pull off a few ships from Farstine if we attack a nearby system, say, Yantor, but he'd keep most of the defense fleet there, including his interdictor."

"Then no feint."

"We'll feint at Yantor," she said. "Send a few gunships in to rile them up. If we get lucky we'll draw off a few capital ships."

"Then what about Farstine?" Hett frowned. They didn't have enough ships to effectively split their forces.

"Grant only has one interdictor in this sector and we'll need to take it out. We'll confirm it's at Farstine, feint at Yantor to drive off a few ships, then jump on top of it and destroy it. It will make Grant's job of catching us much, much harder."

"They'll be a protecting that ship hard," Yvolton said. "How do you plan on knocking it out?"

"It may require a sacrifice," Syne said seriously.

"Madam, we don't have any ships we can give up."

"If we can take out that interdictor it will be worth it. That alone with cripple their operations in this sector."

"You have a plan, then?" Madrisk asked.

"Always. Captain," Syne said without smiling.

"And would the madam explain it to us?" Yvolton sounded tense.

Sajin shifted a little and looked downward, clearly avoiding others' eyes. Hett wasn't the only one who noticed. Old Yvolton frowned at her, then looked back at Syne. "What's been going on?"

"Sajin has been helping me conduct certain secure communications," Syne said smoothly.

"What kind of communications?" Hett asked.

He knew Syne had been hiding some things from him- she was *always* been hiding things, from everyone- but until now he'd never suspected anything significant in the private talks she'd been having with her aide.

"You know as well as anyone that war makes strange bedfellows, A'Sharad." She said it without a hint of innuendo, but Hett blushed anyway, like a stupid boy again. Facing Yvolton's stern gaze she said, "We're not going to be going this alone, Andrein. Grant knows our fleet. He knows our capabilities. And that means we have to surprise him."

The old man still scowled, but he nodded in acceptance. Madrisk did too. They'd followed Syne's father and now they followed her, no matter where she led them. As for Hett, he followed too, for reasons all his own.

The conquest of the Ryndellian Sector had been a difficult campaign. It was often claimed that the Nemoidians who ran the Trade Federation were inherently venal and cowardly, even compared to other non-humans. In his experience, Vice Admiral Octvatian Grant had largely found that to the be the case, though Marath Vooroo, commander of the Federation fleet based at Farstine, had

been a surprising exception. Not only had he fought a stalwart defense of the planet even after Nute Gungray and the other CIS leaders had been killed, he'd refused to surrender after the planet was taken and led Grant and his men on a wild Bantha chase through the Five Veils Nebula, costing far too much time and ships until he was finally captured. In the process, he'd drawn precious resources away from the subjugation of Bavinyar and its so-called Avengers.

Vooroo had been shipped back to Coruscant to face the justice of the New Order. For what it was worth, Grant hoped his execution was quick. He'd didn't deign to respect other commanders easily, especially non-humans who fought wars with mechanized drones instead of real soldiers, but Vooroo had earned a grudging respect.

It was partially because of that respect that Grant hadn't completely dismantled the primary orbital defense station that hung over Farstine. It had been Vooroo's primary droid control platform and the Federation's command center during Grant's initial attacks on the planet. The space station was formed of three broad loops arranged in a triangular pattern and bridged via connecting pylons. The edges of each loop brimmed with turbolasers and projectile launchers and the tall conning tower that arose from the largest loop recalled that of the *Lucrehulk*-class Trade Federation droid control ships that had inspired the station's design.

Grant could have ordered the station taken apart for scrap, or salvaged for parts to repair his own sector fleet after a grueling campaign, but he hadn't. He'd moved his own command post there instead. He liked to walk down the clean hallways of the station and he'd enjoyed watching technicians clear out the racks of droid starfighters from the hangars and refit them for the ARC-170s and V-wings. He'd also had them install the hand-carved wooden desk passed down his family through generations. Moving into his old enemy's house, sitting in his room and redoing the

furniture, made his conquest feel more complete, more satisfying.

As always, however, there was work to be done, and Grant was professional enough not to bask in satisfaction for too long. A new arrival was scheduled to show up at Farstine that day; he didn't know what it was going to be, other than that it was some kind of top-secret project that had been development since before the declaration of the New Order. He found himself uncharacteristically anxious; he paced the station's operations deck all morning, just in case it showed up early.

When it did, it still took him by surprise. Its arrival was not in itself thunderous. One of the tactical officers, an ugly dog-faced Bothan, called out, “Admiral, we have an unidentified object at the edge of the system.”

“That will be our promised contact,” Grant stalked over to the tactical consoles and turned on the main holo. An imagine flicked to life in front of him, showing Farstine's northern ecliptic and the two-dozen ships and stationed in its orbit. At the far edge of the holo, marking the outer limits of the Farstine system, was a large yellow sphere labelled simply as *unidentified*.

The tactical holo was not to perfect scale, but the markers were designed to give an indication of relative size. The yellow marker was bigger than anything, even the green loop marking the primary defense station.

Grant drew his brows together and asked the Bothan, “Do we have dimensions on the object, ensign?”

“They're coming in now, Admiral. It looks like... Goodness.”

“Give me more than that,” Grant scowled.

“It's the size of a small asteroid, sir. About… nineteen kilos long, eight wide.”

Another tactical ensign, human, reported, “She's approaching Farstine fast, sir. Should be in outer orbit in just a few minutes.”

"More and more curious," Grant frowned. If Palpatine was playing some stupid joke he should have thought again. Grant called, "Gunnery stations, go to yellow alert. Warm up your batteries."

"Sir," the human ensign said, "We're getting better readings now. According to the sensors... it *is* an asteroid."

"Asteroids don't drop out of hyperspace, ensign."

"I'm getting traces of ion thrust from the tail of the... asteroid," the Bothan said. "It's a ship of some kind, sir."

"Guns!" Grant barked, "Status!"

"Turbos warming up, sir," the gunnery lieutenant called. "Concussion missiles are primed and ready."

"Good. Communications, prepare an open broadcast, all frequencies."

"Ready now, sir."

He stalked over to the comm console. The lieutenant backed away and let Grant speak directly into the audio grill.

"This is Admiral Octavian Grant of the Imperial Navy," he said sternly. "Approaching vessel, state your purpose or we will open fire."

He waited one second, two, three. He was about to open his mouth when a deep voice replied, "Ah, Octavian, good to see you again."

The voice was marred by static, but there was something familiar in its brusque, harsh tone. Grant said, "Identify yourself or we will open fire."

"The Emperor won't look too fondly on *that*," the voice said. "We're bringing his most special new creation for a most special mission."

"For the last time, identify yourself."

"Stop trying to sound imperious and *listen*, Octavian," the voice said. The static seemed to clear away. He knew it now.

"Commodore Demetrius Zaarin," he pronounced every syllable with bitter precision. "Just what have you brought to my doorstop?"

"We call it the *Eye of Palpatine*. We're going to end the war with it so cool your guns, Octavian, and prepare a shuttle. We have a lot to talk about."

Having a lover was still very strange for A'Sharad Hett. One look from Syne could leave him despondent; one touch could make his spirits swell and banish all the loss he'd seen. When he lay with her in the dark he'd hold her as tight as he could without crushing her, like she was some talisman against the Empire and the evil constantly hunting them.

Since joining the Jedi Order he'd done his best to hew to Master Yoda's rules about attachment, but for so many years he'd been curious; he'd wanted to know what his father had known and feel what his father had felt. Now that he was with Syne he'd come to understand the poverty of imagination, especially the monastic one of a Jedi, compared to the wealth of emotions, good and bad, a man felt when he was *attached*.

Right now, though, he was simply angry.

"I don't understand why you didn't tell me," he said as he paced back and forth in the narrow confines of Syne's cabin. "I thought I had your confidence."

"You still do, A'Sharad," Syne said. She sat on the bed, watching him pace. Her posture was uninviting, stiff, defensive.

"Then why didn't you *tell* me about these new friends you've made?"

"They're not *friends*," Syne said. "They're *allies*. I don't know how useful they're going to be, but now is as good a time as any to find out."

"They can be useful picking at convoys. But for an attack on Grant's base..."

He wanted to tell Syne it was too reckless but he knew she'd shake it off. She'd say they had to be reckless, because it was the only way to keep alive when surrounded by enemies, and she'd be right.

"I didn't tell you for the same reason I didn't tell Andrein or Avit. This needed to stay as secret as possible."

"This could all be a ploy by the Empire. You should have sent me to meet with them. I could have used the Force, found out if they were trustworthy."

"Our new friends are on the run just like us. They're alone and fighting to survive. I'm trusting them and they're trusting us because when the whole galaxy is against you, A'Sharad, *trust* is all any of us have."

Her voice cracked with emotion, the kind she rarely showed, even to Hett. She spoke of the same trust that had put Hett and Syne together suddenly after fighting for a year on opposite sides.

He stopped pacing and faced her, hands balled into fists. He couldn't quite look her in the eye. "You know I'm only trying to protect you."

"Are you?" she asked, voice still soft.

"Of course. You know... how I feel about you." It was still so strange, so hard to put into words.

"A'Sharad, I don't doubt that." She smiled sadly. "But you're not *just* fighting for me. We both know that."

"We're fighting to survive."

"If we just wanted to survive we'd take this ship and fly off to the edge of space, where no one could ever find us."

"You're fighting to free your world from the Empire. I'm fighting to help you."

She shook her head. "We're not going to free Bavinyar, even with our new... allies."

He stared in shock. All the time he'd spent with Syne and her people, they're always talked about *when* they retook their homeworld, *when* they'd drive the Empire out, *when* they'd get retribution for their dead. Sometimes they'd dare say *if*. It was a stubbornness he'd found admirable in the face of their loss, one that had comforted him when his own despair threatened to overwhelm.

He crouched onto his knees in front of Syne, reached out, and placed one of his hands on hers. She said, "We all

know it, A'Sharad. Deep down. You've known it since the day you joined our shabby little fleet. And you've humored us, all this time. You've let us keep hope. It's been very kind of you."

He squeezed her hand. For months he'd thought they were the ones giving him strength. His world suddenly felt hollow, robbed of the illusions that had given it some semblance of purpose.

"Then *why*?" he asked. "What makes you keep going?"

"You know that too, even if you won't say it." She lifted her head, met his eyes. "Revenge, A'Sharad. Revenge for that they've done to us. Revenge for my father."

He shirked from the word. He'd spent many years trying to banish the desire to avenge his parent's death. The loss of a father, recent for her but distant for him, was a shared pain that had drawn them together, though they never spoke of it aloud. Gregor Syne and Sharad Hett were always a silent presence, around them and between them, especially when they were alone.

"Revenge is... not the Jedi way," he said.

She reached out with her other hand and cupped his cheek in her small palm. "Neither is passion, A'Sharad, and you have so much of that. Neither is... what do your kind call it... *attachment*."

Some part of him, buried but still alive, flinched at her touch. He drew back slightly, so her fingertips lightly brushed his face and tickled his black tattoo-markings, but didn't let go of her other hand.

"What is it?" She frowned.

"I'm sorry. For a moment I... remembered what I used to believe."

She didn't ask him if he considered himself a Jedi. Maybe it didn't matter to her, or maybe she knew an answer he did not.

"That was a long time ago."

It was a still less than a year, but it felt like the dream of another life.

"Is that all you want?" he asked, "Just revenge?"

"It's what they've left us, A'Sharad."

He leaned forward again and let her hand cup his face. "And this?"

"This?" She stroked his tattoos with her thumb. "This is what we make ourselves."

He gathered his thoughts and formed a question. "If all you want is to hurt the Empire, why not just ram this ship into Grant's base tomorrow and be done with it?"

"Another day of life is another chance to hurt the Empire. And there will always be more Empire to hurt." Her sad smile twisted into something cruel. "It's the only good thing about it."

"Living for revenge is… a sad way to exist."

"I know, but it's what we have, A'Sharad. It's what all of us have." She leaned forward, and so did he; she planted one kiss on his forehead, then leaned back on the bed.

"Stay with me, A'Sharad. Until the end."

She didn't have to ask. He didn't have to answer.

5

"Hope is a funny thing, Kad'ika*. Everyone needs it to survive. It can lift you up when you're staring down the abyss of despair and it can keep you going when you feel like the whole universe is chasing you down and you're all out of breath. Sometimes, though, hope can blind you. It's a beautiful thing, but you should never, ever trust it."*

It seemed unspeakably bizarre, yet wholly appropriate, that a medical operation that could change the galaxy was being performed in a manure shed.

They'd made sure to clean everything out of it, of course. Uthan and Gilamar had given themselves a good night's sleep before beginning the operation, while the clones had pitched in to clear out the shed and install the equipment and portable power generator the scientists had requested. When the sun came up, Uthan and Gilamar emerged from their rooms, ate a hearty breakfast Jilka and Laseema had prepared, and went out to the shed to meet Maze. The clone, still dressed in his plain brown tunic, gave them only the slightest nod before they led him into the shed and locked the door behind them.

Kal Skirata spent the rest of the day sitting on a log outside the shed, watching and waiting. Everyone else wandered on and off the scene throughout the morning, so that there was always a circle of people quietly holding vigil in the tall-grass field. No one tried to start conversation or break the tense mood, not even Mereel or Jaing.

A little before noon, Gilamar stepped out and declared that the operation was complete. Maze was still out cold from the sedative and Uthan would stay with him to observe. They hoped that, by the next morning, they'd be able to tell whether they'd sufficiently slowed the degradation of his telomeres.

The first part of the watch was done; the harder part remained. Still, the good news was enough for most of the crowd to retreat back to the *karyai* and have something to eat.

Gilamar went with them and Mereel swung an arm over his shoulder and said, “You deserve a big mug of *ne'tra gal*, *ner vod.* My treat!”

“Thanks, but not yet,” Gilamar waved a hand. “I need to keep my wits about me, just in case.”

“Fine, we'll save it for later then.”

On his other side, Corr said, “Once this is over we're going to get you *di'kutla* drunk, *Mij'ika*.”

Gilamar chuckled, “*Vode*, that sounds like a fantastic idea.”

Skirata smirked as he watched them go. He remained seated on the same log; he didn't feel like going after them. Even if the first part was done, it was still going to be many tense hours before they found out if the operation worked. He didn't begrudge Gilamar the chance to catch his breath, or his boys the chance to celebrate. They were in a strange limbo where their deepest hopes were about to either be crushed or fulfilled, and they deserved to enjoy that hope while they had it. Skirata, though, stayed where he was.

He wasn't keeping vigil for Maze, not really. He was doing it for his boys. He'd never been able to make sense of Zey’s adjutant. He hadn't had the good fortune to be trained by Mandalorian sergeants, so Skirata tried not to hold his aversion to *Mando* culture against him. He'd just never been able to understand how the man had spent years being a good little soldier for Zey, studying Republic

politics and military theory, without ever realizing what a gigantic load of *osik* it all was. Even if Palps hadn't turned out to be a crazy Sith monster, it would have still been *osik* and Maze still a fool for believing in politics and theories and anything besides his own brothers.

But fool or no, Maze had put himself on the line for Skirata's sons. He didn't understand why but he didn't have to. He cared about action, not intention, and Maze's actions were going to save his sons.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't notice Fi and Atin until they sat down, one on his left, the other on his right.

"You boys should go celebrate," he told them.

"Not sure if we've won yet, *buir*," Fi said. Once Omega Squad's resident *mir'shebs*, he'd gone gloomy after a near-fatal injury had landed him on Mandalore, free of the GAR but physically debilitated. Getting Parja Bralor had picked up his spirit a lot, but now that she was off-planet with her aunt Rav, Fi had gone sour again.

"Even if it doesn't, they should be able to learn something," Atin said, soft like always. Of all the clones he'd always been the most thoughtful and least boisterous, and Skirata had been both pleased and amused when he'd been the first to pick up a steady girl.

"It has to work," Fi said. "We need this."

"If it doesn't work we'll find something else. Uthan and Mij are smart. If anyone can do it, it's them."

"I'd rather we had Ko Sai, but at least this time we know to keep 'em away from any rope."

Skirata fought a scowl. It had been his stupid idea to let Mereel and Jaing interrogate the captured Kaminoan geneticist alone. He'd let them drive her to suicide despite being their best chance at reducing the clones' fast aging. It was yet another thing he'd never forgive himself for.

"It's all right, *buir*," Atin said. "They'll do it. It'll work out."

Skirata raised an eyebrow. “Laseema turning you into an optimist, *At'ika*?”

He said nothing, and only smiled a little.

“We need this,” Fi repeated, “Not just for us.”

“You have a galaxy full of *vode* who deserve better than they got,” Skirata said. “I'm not sure how we'll mass-produce the procedure. We can't afford to have hundreds of clones coming to Kyrimorut for a special op, it'll draw too much attention. I'm hoping Mij and Uthan can just do a detailed write-up of the DNA modifications so clones can have it done anywhere. It'll be easier to disseminate.”

“I don't care about those clones,” Fi said brusquely. “I just want Niner and Dar back.”

That was it, of course. Skirata kicked himself for being too big-picture. The damned Jedi must have been rubbing off on him.

“Darman needs to be with his son,” said Atin.

“We'll get the Omegas back together again, I promise. Jaing got a call from Niner. Says he and Dar are on their way here.”

Both their eyes went wide. Fi asked, “When did this happen?”

“Right before Maze went under. Haven't spread the word yet. I figure people have enough on their minds.”

“*Shab*,” Atin grinned. “They're really... coming home? Both of them?”

“So they said. Niner says Dar convinced their boss to send them on a mission to Mandalore, them and one more clone. I figure it won't be hard to straighten him out once he gets here. Not that we'll give him a choice.”

“*Shab*,” Atin repeated. “Looks like security's gone lax since Zey's time. Or something.”

“Never look a gift bantha in the mouth, *Ad'ika*.”

“When's their ETA?” Fi asked.

“It's a long ride out from Triple Zero. Over a day. But they'll get here. And we'll have a special present waiting for them.”

"I hope so, *buir."*

"Hope's got nothing to do with it." He threw old martial harshness into his voice. "We're getting the squad back together, and you're all gonna live long happy lives and make lots of tough *Mando* babies. Then you're gonna to keep living 'til you've got great-grandkids, *understood*?"

"Yes, *sir*," they snapped in unison, then started laughing.

He patted Fi on the knee. "Good, now go get some lunch before Mird scarfs it all down."

"All right, *buir*," the man rose, more slowly and awkwardly than Atin. "Do you want us to bring you something?"

"If Mird leaves any scraps."

"We'll see what we can do."

Skirata kept his place into the afternoon. Their meal over, the clones started to come back and wait with him. As promised, Fi brought back half of a spiced nuna breast, no longer warm but still delicious. In the late afternoon, when the sun was starting to turn shades of gold, the Nulls went out to the hangar to pull back the camo netting. Skirata knew what that meant and tried to keep himself from getting *di'kutla* nervous. Right on cue, the battered disc of Nyreen Vollen's *Cornucopia* fell out of the sky and settled easily into the hangar next to *Aay'han* and the Aggressor fighter.

He didn't get up to greet her, though he could tell most everyone else in the circle was eying him and silently urging him on. It wasn't that he didn't want to see her; he just didn't want to make a fool of himself like an idiot teenager.

So he waited for her to come to him. Ny sauntered out of the hangar to the shed and its circle and waiting clones. Ruu was behind her, but instead of walking over to her *buir* she joined A'den and Kom'rk and headed for the *karyai*. Jaing walked beside Ny, apparently explaining what was happening, but her eyes were locked on Skirata.

Gilamar and Scout had been sitting next to Skirata, but they smoothly and quietly relocated, leaving an open space on the log. Ny walked up to it and said, very casually with a hint of playfulness, “You look beat, Shorty.”

“I've been here all day,” he said. “Haven't done a thing to wear myself out.”

“You've been waiting this whole time?”

“It's what I've always wanted.”

She smiled, just a little, and sat down beside him. The others were all pretending to have their own conversations but neither he nor Ny were fooled.

The worst part of it was, he *did* like her, and it had sneaked up on him without him really noticing. She wasn't a *Mando*, but she had the independence and resourcefulness of one. Like him, she'd already had more love and loss and general stress than any being deserved in a lifetime, but she didn't dwell on it and didn't let it slow her down. She was durable, which may not have sounded like the greatest compliment for a woman, but Skirata was old and didn't kid himself about it; Atin and Ordo were welcome to their pretty young wives, but if any sort of woman was right for him, Ny was it.

He'd spent his life dealing with things he could touch, things that he could physically hurt and that could hurt him back, so he still had a hard tme placing these feelings she gave him. Ny had been making him feel adolescent and gooey inside and he didn't know how to deal with that. He certainly couldn't put it into words for her. Mandos weren't generally renowned for their lyrical verve, aside from colorful cursing, and he was no exception.

But Ny understood that without having to hear him say it, and that might have been the best thing about her.

“So,” he asked, finally, “How's Arla?”

“I think she'll be okay. She's with other Concordian exiles now. Some of them even knew her from way back, though I don't think she remembers. They'll take good care of her.”

Skirata wondered if Arla's memories would start coming back in time. If some did, he hoped they were good ones from Concord Dawn, because she'd had very few after that. He didn't know how *Bard'ika*'s memory-wipe Force magic really worked, and Jusik himself seemed a little unsure too. Given that he'd be doing something similar to Zey, Maze, and Kina Ha soon, he hoped Jusik figured it all out, though at the moment he was just glad to have Arla out of his hair. It wasn't that he didn't want to do good by Jango's sister, but his boys were more important. They were more important than anything, even the woman next to him.

"It was brave of Maze to volunteer," Ny sounded surprised, the same as everyone. "Why do you think he did it?"

"I have no idea," he said honestly. He didn't care either.

"And if it works on him, it will work on everyone, including the Nulls?"

"That's what Uthan says."

"And you trust her?"

He did, and he was surprised to realize it. She'd been his prisoner at first, but her homeworld's destruction and her romance with Gilamar had efficiently and unquestionably made her part of Kyrimorut's clan of misfits. Trust had never been easy to him before, given or received, but since Order 66 he'd acquired a strange knack for it.

"I'm getting soft," he said at last.

She rapped a knuckle against his gold armor. "Not so soft, Shorty, but that's okay. I like a man who can take some knocks."

He turned his head just a little, so she wouldn't see his smile. He might have to keep watch through the night, but if Ny stayed with him for a while, it wouldn't be so bad.

Maze wasn't sure when he woke up exactly. Sometimes he thought he saw shafts of daylight slanting between the gaps in the shed's wooden boards. Other times he thought he saw people around him: Uthan, Gilamar, Skirata, Zey.

Once he thought Etain Tur-Mukan was leaning over him and he knew for sure he was dreaming. She'd been trying to say something but he couldn't make out what; even in dreams his senses were addled with Gilamar's sedative.

Yet when he saw Bardan Jusik standing on one side and Arligan Zey on the other, their faces sharply underlit by the glow from a primitive oil-lamp, he instinctively knew he was awake.

"You finally came out of it," Jusik smiled a little. Lamplight and shadows made his face look twisted. "I knew I only had to give you a little nudge."

He'd used the Force to wake him up, then. Maze wasn't sure how he felt about that. His eyes shifted to Zey. The light made sharp cheekbones stand out more against a face gone narrow from weight loss, and it deepened his wrinkles and the grizzle of his beard. Beyond Zey there was nothing, not even the hint of daylight through the shed's wooden boards.

He opened his mouth to speak; his throat cracked. Zey wordlessly took a small tube of water and placed it in his mouth. Maze sucked on it like a child, and when he opened his mouth again Zey took it away.

"I was out... all day?" he asked.

"*Mij'ika* overdid the sedative a little," Jusik said. "But you've come out okay."

With effort, he propped himself up on his elbows. His body was covered in sheets. He flexed his toes, shoulders, calves, abdomen. He felt everything move.

"The operation." He looked at Zey. "Was it a success?"

The man seemed to take forever to respond; Maze waited breathlessly until he nodded. Then he felt his strength leave him. He tumbled back onto the cot and stared up at the shed's dark ceiling. A smile, strange and unfamiliar, came to his face.

"They did it?" he asked. He had to be sure. He might have been dreaming still.

“The tests check out.” Jusik squeezed his shoulder warmly. “You've got a long and healthy life ahead of you, Maze.”

The prospect was dizzying. A shortened lifespan was one of so many things he'd accepted as a basic fact of life, but then Order 66 had thrown that and so many other certainties into question. He still couldn't picture it, not really. He had fifty, sixty, even seventy years ahead of him, plenty of time to find a new job, find a *girl*, start a family, create a new place for himself in the universe.

His wonder must have shown on his face because Zey started laughing. It wasn't a big laugh, but it was enough to shake his body and add incongruous mirth to his unshaven, wasted face. He'd *never* seen Zey laugh before; even Jusik's jaw dropped.

“I'm sorry,” Zey waved a hand. “Bardan, please, can you give us a moment in private?”

“Of course,” Jusik glanced at Maze. “They've set up a cot in another shed and put Ordo through the procedure. They want to make double-sure that the operation works for the Nulls before doing the others.”

Maze noticed for the first time that all of Gilamar's medical equipment was gone.

“I'll be fine,” he said, and with a nod, Jusik stepped outside.

A silence fell over the shed. Maze propped himself up again and looked forward at the sheet stretched over his abdomen, his legs, the two tented poles of his feet. His whole body still felt woozy from the sedative, and perhaps slightly aching, like he'd just started a new set of exercises. He didn't feel like he'd been given a new lease on life, but somehow he was sure he had.

“Congratulations, Maze,” Zey’s voice was husky. “Everything changes for you after today.”

Maze looked up at that face, smiling but still withered and weighted. It brought him back to earth.

"The Empire is still looking for us both," Maze said, "And I don't trust Skirata to keep us safe if a crunch comes. We should plan to move soon."

Zey canted his head slightly. "If you don't trust Skirata, why did you volunteer for this operation?"

"Because I wanted a real life, same as anyone else," he said, but that was only half of it. He could have let any of the other clones act as lab rats; it certainly would have been safer.

"Why did you really do it, Maze?"

He exhaled and looked at his feet. "I didn't do it for Skirata's men. I'm glad they're being helped, but I didn't do it for them."

"Then why?"

He couldn't bring himself to look at Zey, and instead kept his eyes on those two peaks in the blanket. "I don't like being useless. I don't like being in someone's debt. I can't make a difference in the galaxy anymore but I wanted to make a difference to *someone*, even Skirata's brainwashed Mandos. What would the Jedi say? Is that selfish?"

Zey didn't respond at first. He waited, still looking at his toes, until the Jedi said, "You've done a good thing for a lot of men today, Maze. That's all that matters."

He exhaled, "Thank you."

Another silence settled over them. Zey broke it again. "Do you know what you want to do with the rest of your life?"

"Survive," Maze said simply. He didn't know the where or the how yet, but he could figure that out. Zey placed a hand on his shoulder. It was comforting, almost fatherly, and he knew they would figure it out together.

Scout was no doctor like Gilamar, nor an expert scientist like Uthan, but she could still make herself useful.

Once they confirmed that the procedure was effective on Maze, it took them a full night and a full day to repeat it on the other clones at Kyrimorut. In addition to the repurposed

manure shed, they also laid out beds in Uthan's laboratory and in Gilamar's personal quarters. Uthan and the doctor split up in order to administer to two clones simultaneously, and when each procedure had been completed, the clones were moved into the central room of the *karyai* to recover under the care of the women and Jedi.

For her part, Scout embraced her role as an all-purpose runner. She was constantly on the go, fetching supplies and running verbal reports to Kal Skirata, who paced in anxious circles in the center of the *karyai* as one clone after another was carried on biers and laid on the ground around him.

The less Uthan and Gilamar needed her, the more she helped the clones recover. Once the clones started waking up, they needed water. She joined Besany, Laseema, and Jilka in making sure everyone was hydrated.

To Scout's slight surprise, the women worked as a smooth team. Everyone knew there had been a lot of tension between Besany and Jilka, and for good reason. When Besany had come under suspicion for her helping Skirata's less-than-legal activities, the Nulls had shifted suspicion onto Jilka, her co-worker at the treasury office.

That had gotten Jilka arrested for something she hadn't done, and after that she'd been broken out of jail and whisked off to Mandalore. Understandably, she'd been less than happy to be there. Corr had softened her up a little bit, and that in turn had thawed her relationship with Besany.

At one point, when Maze and Ordo were ready for something besides water, Scout ducked into the kitchen to help the other women brew up a pot of soup. Despite the long day, all of them were energetic, smiling.

When Besany spotted her, her smile got bigger. She said, "You're tireless, Scout. I'm impressed."

"I'm just trying to help," Scout shrugged, and realized for the first time that she *was* getting exhausted.

"You're doing a bit of everything," said Jilka. "Mij and Uthan really appreciate it."

Scout knew that already, but it felt good hearing it aloud. “I’ll just be glad when it over and everyone’s healed.”

“Not half as glad as us,” Besany said, and the other women laughed and nodded, even Jilka.

Scout realized for the first time that they were about to get real, full lives with the men they loved. That was probably motivation to keep them going all night.

She felt surprising envy toward them, but also a little hope. If these women could find unlikely love with men created solely to kill, well, maybe she could experience it one day too. The one upside to this dark new galaxy was that a lot of things were possible that hadn’t been before.

Eventually, Scout helped ladle out soup to the recovering clones. As the room filled up, she watched the anxiety slowly fade from Skirata’s face. The tightness in his body went gradually slack, giving way to something that, if not happiness, was at least cautious relief.

Skirata stayed on his feet even though he hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours. Aside from the clones themselves, none of them had. Despite that everyone stayed alert as Besany, Laseema, and Jilka insisted on plying them with water, soup, and caf. Chemical energy shot through Scout's blood and she found herself jogging from place to place just to drain the excess jolt from her body.

The last one they did was Fi. By the time they took him out to Uthan's lab and put him under the sedative, half the clones had started waking up. With her work finally done, Scout wandered into the now-full *karyai* and sat cross-legged on the floor in the midst of them. Maze sat on the edge of the room next to Zey, watching with quiet satisfaction as they pushed back their sheets and stretched and examined their bodies, as if there was something new and different to find. On the other side of the room Ordo, now fully awake and recovered, sat with a mirrored expression. Besany, taking a break from being chief morale officer, leaned against his shoulder with her eyes closed. She was smiling as she slept.

It was late afternoon when Gilamar came into the *karyai*. He stood in the doorway, still wearing white gloves and a white doctor's apron that made him look like a resident at some Core world hospital instead of a Mandalorian. Most of the clones had awakened and sat upright on their biers. They turned to in unison to look at the doctor.

Gilamar looked surprised and slightly embarrassed by the attention. He took off his gloves, wiped the sweat on his apron, and said, "Ovolot is finishing things up. It's done."

Jaing, Mereel, and Prudii started clapping. Scout did too, and then everyone else seemed to join. The *karyai* was filled with chaotic applause as Skirata lurched forward and grappled Gilamar in a bear hug. The doctor stumbled two steps back under the smaller man's attack before, laughing, he returned the grip.

Gently shoving Besany off his shoulder, Ordo rose to his feet and said something in *Mando'a*. Scout had no idea what it meant but the clones, even the ones still woozy from the sedative, threw their fists in the air and cheered. A hand slapped hard on her shoulder and suddenly Prudii leaned close.

"We're going to celebrate, *ad'ika*," the man grinned.

"Oh," Scout blinked. "Well, you deserve it."

"You're *shabla* right we do. You have no idea what we've done to make this day happen. Thanks for everything you've done, kid. You're not so bad for a *Jetii*."

"Well, you're not so bad for a *Mando* thug."

She'd meant it as a joke, but his face went stern. Her breath caught and his big, rough, killer's hand was suddenly very heavy on her shoulder.

Then he bore his teeth and laughed. He gave her two hard slaps on the back, rose, and made his way to the kitchen.

Scout rose on wobbly feet. Another hand came down on her shoulder and a voice said, "Steady now, *ad'ika."*

She knew Gilamar's voice in an instant and turned to grin at him. "Congratulations. I know you worked hard for this."

"*We* worked hard. Every *shabla* one of us, and we all wanted it bad."

He glanced over his shoulder. Skirata was leaning in close, saying something private to Walon Vau that only the strill slinking between their legs might hear.

"Nobody wanted this more than Kal," Gilamar told her. "Not even the clones. You know that, don't you?"

She nodded once. "I do."

"And it's not over either. Death Watch is still gunning for us and so are the Imps. We still might have to *ba'slan shev'la* but even if we do we have to find a way to get this procedure done on as many clones as we can. There's plenty on Mandalore alone who deserve it- Sull, Levet, all the rest. Hell, even Spar. Our work's not over and we're still not safe."

Despite all the happy noise spinning around her, Scout felt very sober. "You're not usually this much of a mood-killer, are you?"

"Nope," Gilamar put on a smile; it seemed very sincere. "*Ad'ika*, after all the medical jobs I've done in my career, I have never been prouder. Tomorrow we worry about impending doom. *Tonight* we celebrate."

Scout looked toward the kitchen; Kom'rk, Laseema, Corr, and Jilka were crowding the bright doorway. "Looks like the party's already getting started. How's that ale going to mix with all the stuff we gave them?"

"They'll just get drunk all the quicker," Gilamar shrugged. "And that might be for the best. More for the rest of us."

"I'll, um, hold off if you don't mind."

"Not at all. Like I said, more for the rest of us."

A big strill suddenly knocked Scout in the legs, and Walon Vau gave Gilamar and knock on the side of the head that was probably meant to be playful.

"Nice going, *Mij'ika*. Are you *finally* going to take that drink?" Scout had never seen an upbeat Walon Vau before. It didn't seem real.

"I think it's about time, yes," Gilamar rubbed his head.

"Good. You deserve it. Go fetch that *cyar'ika* of yours so we can toast you both. You too, little one."

"Thanks." Scout folded her hands behind her back. "I appreciate that. Do you think this will help us get your Delta Squad home?"

The normal hardness settled back on Vau's face. "If this doesn't convince them to desert, nothing will. We've just got to figure out *how.*"

"But that's tomorrow's problem," Gilamar said.

"Tomorrow," Vau nodded. "Tonight we drink."

"Damn right."

Vau and Gilamar staggered off toward the kitchen, arms on each other's shoulders. Lord Mirdalan stayed behind and brushed its side against Scout's legs. She crouched down to scratch the flaps of wrinkled skin on its neck and look it in the eyes.

"We did it, *Mird*," she whispered, "We really did it."

She'd never guzzled ale like a *Mando*, or guzzled ale at all, but she figured the warm glow she felt in her chest right then was better than anything a bottle could provide.

I thought that night was the happiest of my life. It was the culmination of all we'd fought and dreamed for. I could barely wrap my mind around the sudden reality that I was going to grow old with my brothers instead of watching them slip away while I was still young. For that one night even *Kal'buir* laid down all his anxieties and enjoyed our victory. After all, what was the point of fighting if you couldn't enjoy a victory? That's what we thought then. Maybe if we had kept our guard up things would have been different.

When you live a life like the kind we have you accumulate layers of regrets. Each new regret overlays the previous one like clots of dirt on a grave, and while the old regrets don't go away you don't forget about them either. With enough time they become the ground you walk on. The terrain of your world would be fundamentally different

without them. Still, a regret is a regret. This is one of the lower layers; the newer ones will hurt more.

We cleared out the center of the *karyai.* We pulled Uthan and Gilamar into the middle of the circle, gave them a big round of applause, and forced them to guzzle a bottle of Keldabe wine between them. Ordo was the self-appointed toastmaster and he goaded Uthan into doing it; once she was on board Gilamar's resolve crumbled. Jaing gave Scout a push and shoved her into the circle too. She didn't drink but she took a bow, blushing fiercely the whole time. Then, to everyone's surprise, Ordo turned to the back of the room and tipped his imaginary hat to Kina Ha. To my even greater surprise, everyone clapped. The Kaminoan just stood there, tall and stoic, but I could feel the satisfaction coming off her in the Force.

After that, Mereel put on some traditional Mandalorian dances, all jaunty percussion and woodwinds and strings, and people danced. The clones stomped their feet even though their brilliant new bodies were muddled by alcohol and left-over anesthetics. Fi stumbled along but he did his best.

Naturally, many happy couples clasped hands and spun each other round until they were dizzy: Ordo and Besany, Uthan and Gilamar, Atin and Laseema, Corr and Jilka, the newest pairing. The other Nulls took turns spinning Ruu around in a way that was affectionate but not romantic. They'd accepted her as their sister then, heart and soul. Prudii was the most nimble; Kom'rk tripped over his own feet. I was learning new things about my brothers all the time.

Even *Kal'buir* danced, after Ny dragged him into the center of the ring. Not even the Nulls had seen him dance before. They said it was the highlight of the night, but to me, the most incredible moment was when a roomful of clones turned to applaud a Kaminoan with honest stupid grins on their faces. When I saw that, I thought it was the greatest miracle in the galaxy,

No, I didn't dance then. I've never been the dancing type; they certainly didn't teach us how to do it in Jedi school, though Scout tried her best. I was one of the handful who lingered on the outside, along with Kina Ha, Zey, Maze, and Vau with Lord Mirdalan. You stayed on the sides too, and from time to time different people would drop off the dance floor to hold you tight: Besany, Laseema, Ny, sometimes *Kal'buir* or Fi or Atin.

They tried to drag me into the circle a few times, but I didn't feel like dancing. I was happy just to stand at the edge, stare into the happy circle, and take in the moment. Like I said, I thought then it was the happiest night of my life. And sometimes, if I can separate it from all the awful things that would happen right afterward, it still is.

It went on for hours, of course. Even the most stuck-up *aruietisse* admit that *Mandos* know how to party. But the clones were messed up by a combination of ale and sedatives, so people started retiring well before dawn.

At one point, after I helped Laseema get Atin to his quarters, I came back into the quieting *karyai* to see a slower dance going on, with couples stepping in light circles. Besany had already taken you away and put you down to sleep, and as I recall you were as worn-out as anybody else. All the single Nulls had gathered on the opposite side of the room to talk quietly. I was surprised to see Maze in the middle of them. He wasn't acting particularly chatty but he looked comfortable nonetheless.

Closer to me, I saw Zey, Scout, and Kina Ha. I felt at that moment that I belonged with the Jedi instead of my brothers. It wasn't that I was doubting my allegiances; I realized I was going to be saying some goodbyes soon.

When I walked into the circle all eyes went to me. As I'd expected, they'd been having Jedi talk, and none of them could figure out if I was an intruder or not. I couldn't either, which at least put us on equal footing.

After an awkward pause, Scout said, "Master Zey doesn't want me to stay on Mandalore."

I glanced at him. He didn't look apologetic. The day's victory had given him some of his old spirit back. He said, "I'm thinking of her best interests. The men here have won the day but they have a lot of enemies."

"And we don't?" Scout asked.

"They have Death Watch *and* the Empire coming after them," Zey said. "I think we'd all be safer just running from the Empire."

"I'm staying with my *vode*." I crossed my arms.

Zey gave a little sigh. "I know. I'm given up trying to argue you with, Bardan, but I think Scout can still be saved."

He added a slight smile at the end, but he was trying to append levity where it didn't belong. I wanted to tell him that just because Scout was young didn't mean she was a fool, that I'd only been a few years older than her when I left the Order. Then I realized that might not have gone well with him, or for that matter with Kina Ha, who I'd gradually come to realize saw all of us as young and foolish.

"I still want to be a Jedi," Scout said firmly. "That won't change, Master Zey. But I want to stay with Uthan and Mij."

Zey looked at her without speaking. He knew what she saw in those two: parents she'd never had, family she'd needed no matter how much the Order had decried attachment. And I knew he was afraid she was gradually going to fall onto the dirty path of the Mandalorians, probably giving in to her fear, hate, and anger along the way. He still thought attachment was a dangerous thing, though he seemed reluctant to say it. He was underestimating her, just like he'd underestimated me.

Kina Ha spoke up, finally. "What will you do if you remain here on Mandalore, child?"

"There are people I can help," Scout said. "There are a lot more clones that deserve full lives. I can help Uthan and Mij give it to them."

“There's nothing more *Jedi* than helping people,” I told Zey.

“Will you stay with the Skiratas?” he asked her.

“That depends what Uthan and Mij do. For a time, probably.”

I tried to picture Scout living and fighting alongside the Nulls laughing and drinking across the room. She was an unlikely candidate, all skinny and awkward with the uncertainty of adolescence, but at the same time she was so like Etain as I'd first known her that it seemed natural.

Zey still looked like he was trying to figure out the way to unlock a hard puzzle. It was interesting to see that look second-hand instead of being on the receiving end.

Kina Ha suddenly turned the conversation in a new direction. “Master Zey, what will *you* do after you've left Mandalore?”

Zey blinked, jarred from his puzzle and set to study another. “My main priority now is to find more Jedi. There are plenty of clones who deserve saving but there are more of our people out there too.”

“And what will you do when you find them?” I asked.

“What will you do when you save more clones?”

I realized, to my surprise, that I didn't have an answer. So instead I turned the conversation again. “Master Kina Ha, what will you do when you escape?”

She stared down at us with those black emotionless eyes, and for a moment I felt echoes of that abject hatred of her race Skirata and the Nulls had drilled into me. Ashamed, I looked away.

“The Force is life,” she said, “And a Jedi exists to serve the Force.”

It was the kind of maddeningly vague answer that used to frustrate me, but coming from Kina Ha, somehow, it was acceptable. I knew she meant what she said and would act as she meant, no matter what came her way.

I glanced at the slow-dancing couples, the laughing drunks. It seemed like the wrong time to bring this up, but I

did it anyway. I looked up at Kina Ha and said, "*Kal'buir* doesn't want you to be able to tell anyone about Kyrimorut. I've suggesting using the Force to erase your memories of this place."

"As you did on poor Arla Fett?"

"That's right. But I'd like your permission."

She closed her black eyes, opened them. "I suppose the alternative is to terminate me."

She might have been using that clinical, soldierly term to mock me, I wasn't sure. But I nodded.

"Then you may," she said. Her flat mouth seemed to curve a little. "But not tonight."

"No," I exhaled in relief. "Not tonight."

Suddenly the music started playing fast behind us. The Nulls hopped into the circle, leaving Maze to watch by himself. As the dancers already on the floor picked up speed to match the tempo, Mereel waved one hand at me.

"Come on, *Bard'ika*! Don't just sit on your *shabla shebs* all night! Get in here and *dance*!"

I looked at the Jedi behind me. Kina Ha stared down blankly; Zey looked tired again; Scout had a mischievous grin on her face.

"I've had my turn," she said. "Get in there, *Bard'ika*."

And she gave much a strong Force-aided push onto the dance floor. And yes, I danced, or I tried to. Fi took me by the shoulders and tried to swing me around like Ordo did Besany; we both staggered like idiots and were the laughing stocks of the party, not that either of us minded. I laughed with them until tears started coming down my cheeks.

I thought it was the happiest moment of my life.

Sometimes it still is.

6

"Sometimes you think you've got everything figured out. You think you've seen ever potential trap and mapped out every contingency. But you have to remember that on the other side of the galaxy, some other being is thinking the exact same thing, and neither of you realize that someday your paths will cross and both of you will be surprised."

As the *Eye of Palpatine* loomed in the viewport of his shuttle, it took a lot of effort for Octavian Grant not to show his curiosity and confusion in front of his subordinates. The thing- he couldn't call it a ship or a space station- seemed to have been built into a massive asteroid some nineteen kilometers long and eight kilometers wide. He squinted to see the glowing mouths of hangar bays scattered across its rocky surface; he saw conning towers and weapon emplacements and communications arrays jutting out of the rock seemingly at random, and though their shuttle was approaching the thing head-on, he could also see the corona of what must have been a massive collection of ion engines glowing beyond the rocky surface.

The *thing* had an overall cobbled-together look to it that kept it from being visually impressive. An untrained eye would think all those hangars and gun ports had just been tacked onto the surface of the asteroid, but Grant could see the logic behind their placement. To provide power to those emplacements, the entire asteroid must have been hollowed out, though what could be inside, he had no idea.

Grant felt simultaneously ashamed and insulted that he hadn't heard of this creation earlier. He prided himself on knowing what everyone else was doing and his information network had uncovered hints of other secret projects, including the massive weapons platform being researched in the Maw. No doubt Zaarin was going to taunt him for his ignorance too, adding proverbial insult to the injury of his own ignorance.

Before the war, Grant and most of the army and navy's non-clone officers had served in the Republic Judicial Forces. Compared to the GAR and the new Imperial military, the Judicials had been a small and cozy organization where every high-ranking officer had shared a mission or at least a cup of caf with every one of his peers at some point. Grant knew most of the Navy's top brass personally from his time there; he'd served under Terrinald Screed at Rothana and had helped Hurst Romodi clean up a local pirate infestation near Thyferra.

Demetrius Zaarin had been a different case. Instead of entering the Judicial Forces through the academy like most officers, he'd trained in starship engineering on Coruscant and been brought into the organization after his local senator pulled several important strings after receiving a hefty campaign donation.

That alone had made Grant dislike him; a proper soldier earned his rank because of proper breeding, proper training, and proper performance. The two of them had shared a single mission together, subduing a group of Rodian marauders harassing shipments between Ando and Mon Gazza. Zaarin had been more interested in testing his hardware modifications than completing the mission, and Grant had nearly lost a ship and, more importantly, his career because of it. Contrition, of course, was not in Zaarin's repertoire, and he'd continued to insist that the entire debacle had been Grant's fault alone.

Grant’s shuttle veered into one of the hangars and was swallowed by it. The hangar itself could have been on any

ship in the Empire; it had the same straight lines, the same steel-gray walls as one found on any star destroyer. As the shuttle landed on the broad open deck in front of some two-dozen white-armored clone troopers, Grant noticed the line of strange vessels along the port-side wall. There were two dozen of them and they hung from a grid of durasteel trusses jutting out from the bulkhead. They vaguely resembled V-wings or Eta-2 interceptors but their cockpits were totally spherical save for the octagonal forward viewports, while the two parallel solar panels flanking either side of the sphere were flat instead of canted inward, and so large that the fighters needed specialized docking apparatus, lest all their weight press down on the twin panels.

It was a strange design for a fighter craft and he knew instantly it must have been Zaarin's doing; the man had been instrumental in work on the Eta-2 with Kuat Drive Yards. Despite being part of the Republic military he'd become very active in working with the Kuati manufacturers, which reflected the bond between government and private military contractors that had tightened during the war.

When he disembarked the shuttle he took two troopers with him. They were recruited men, not clones grown in a vat, which was what he always preferred to surround himself with. He'd never trusted the clones; they'd always struck him as glorified war droids rather than genuine fighting men, pulled from Kaminoan clone vats and brainwashed into doing whatever their mysterious masters made them to do. When the clones had turned on their Jedi superiors he'd felt vindicated in his mistrust.

Commodore Demetrius Zaarin clearly had no qualms about dealing with clones. He had two fulls squads of them at his back. Zaarin was a broad-shouldered man half a head taller than Grant, and he stood at the column with two other beings beside him whom the admiral didn't recognize: one young man and one young woman, both in civilian

clothes. The man had a thin, ascetic build, dark hair and eyes, pale skin, and an awkward beak of a nose. There was something greedy in his pointed in his face and Grant distrusted him instinctively.

The woman had darkly tanned skin and black hair pulled in a series of braids behind her back. Grant saw the silver cylinder dangling from the belt of her black tunic and nearly lost his step. He'd heard that the Emperor had recruited some Jedi padawans and errant Force-users as so-called 'Inquisitors,' special agents that worked as a smaller, more streamlined, more loyal version of the exterminated Jedi Order. Apparently Palpatine thought he could tame them, but Grant had never trusted any Force-user and he knew Zaarin had a distaste for them as well.

Nonetheless, there was a smile on the Commodore's broad face; he'd always been a good actor. Zaarin said, "Welcome to the *Eye of Palpatine*, Vice Admiral."

"Thank you for having me, Commodore," Grant put extra inflection on Zaarin's rank. "I'm quite eager to see this creation of yours."

"Of course." Zaarin held out hands to either side. "Let me make introductions. The young man here is Ohran Keldor. He was the chief designer of the *Eye of Palpatine,* so if anything you may call it *his* creation*."*

Grant had to hide his shock. The boy couldn't have been older than twenty-five. He looked supremely proud of his accomplishment as he said, "Welcome to the *Eye*, Admiral. You're seeing the first of a new generation of technology that is going to transform the New Order and revolutionize warfare as we know it."

It sounded like a bad marketing pitch. Since he wore no uniform, he must have been some private contractor. Grant glance at the Zaarin; the commodore, blank-faced but seemingly unimpressed, gestured to the woman.

"This is Ameesa Darys. She is an advisor on this mission."

The woman nodded politely and said nothing. Suddenly Grant felt something he'd never expected: pity for Demetrius Zaarin. The man hated overeager civilians and Force-users even more than Grant, and now he was stuck between two of them. It was sad, pathetic, and, on further reflection, quite satisfying to see.

"I'm sure there's much to talk about," Grant fixed his attention on Zaarin. "Shall we?"

"First, I believe Mr. Keldor would like to give you a brief tour of the facilities," Zaarin said.

Grant deigned a look at the civilian. "All right. Lead on, Mr. Keldor."

"With pleasure," the young man smiled.

Keldor's tour took somewhere close to an hour. They spent most of it walking down long and empty corridors, through big empty rooms made to house supplies and personnel. The emptiness was gaping and impossible to ignore; it felt different from the emptiness aboard other new ships. On a new *Victory*-class destroyer you could imagine the decks with a full crew, but desolation felt built into this strange machine.

Keldor explained the idea with obvious pride. *Eye of Palpatine* was unlike anything else in the galaxy. It was heavily automated, with most of its systems coordinated by a supremely complicated artificial intelligence Keldor called 'the Will.' The title was pompous but Keldor's creation was clearly something unique and beyond the capabilities of typical shipboard droid minds. Keldor's specialty was artificial intelligence and the Will had, apparently, been the primary selling point when he pitched the idea to then-Chancellor Palpatine in the middle stages of the war.

The *Eye* was a floating battlestation, gunnery platform, and troop carrier. The need for command crew was minimal thanks to the Will, something Grant found rather offensive. The ship had no troops yet, but it was programmed to pick up reserve units of Spaarti-grown

clones on a variety of worlds. Keldor rattled off the systems casually- Pzob, Tatooine, Gamorr, and other backwaters in the same quadrant of the galaxy as Farstine. The clones were sleeper units, flash-trained not to fight like most quick-grown Spaarti clones but to lie in wait and live like normal beings until the *Eye* called on them and brought them aboard for a second round of flash-learning that would turn them into the killing machines they were meant to be. Unlike the Spaarti clones that had been funneled into the Grand Army during the late stages of the war, these clones had been bred from a variety of different human templates instead of just Jango Fett, making it easier to insert groups of them as sleepers.

To Grant it all sounded needlessly convoluted. The Empire was full of soldiers, including Kamino clones, the new Spaartis (the GAR additions had seemed even more unreliable and droid-like than the originals) and a growing number of enlisted men from all around the galaxy who either wanted to serve the New Order or saw it as a way to climb power's ladder. Grant knew Palpatine had been building up reserve forces during the late stages of the war, cleverly paving the way for his ascension to Emperor, so there was some logic to the *Eye*'s creation; he just didn't see what is was good for now that Palpatine had already seized most of the galaxy with truly impressive ruthlessness.

He wanted to ask Zaarin about this one-on-one, and he finally got his chance once the tour ended. Zaarin dismissed Keldor as well as Darys, who hadn't said a word since Grant have come aboard. Keldor had come off as pompous and overconfident; Darys was intimidating for her silence.

The commodore led the admiral into a small briefing room. Zaarin dropped into a chair and invited Grant to do the same. Now that the civilian and the Force-user were gone he allowed some of his fatigue to show. Grant didn't know whether to enjoy the sight or be worried by it.

He sat down opposite Zaarin and asked, “So, do you have an actual role on this ship, Demetrius, or are you just here to babysit?”

It was the right and wrong thing to say. Zaarin wide face creased into a scowl. “I’m the ranking Imperial officer aboard this battlemoon.”

“Are you now?” Grant crossed his arms over his chest, under his rank insignia.

“You know what I mean.”

“So you *are* a babysitter?”

“The *Eye* is Keldor and Palpatine's project. The fighters you saw in the hangar are prototypes of mine. We're calling them TIE fighters- Twin Ion Engines. No matter what happens with *Eye*, I guarantee you've already seen some of the future of interstellar warfare.”

“Those fighters didn't look especially durable.”

“They don't have to be. They're easier to mass-produce than Eta-2 or ARC fighters and easier to fly. The solar panels draw power that would otherwise require large fuel storage. We also stripped away hyperdrive, projectile weapons, and energy shields to maximize speed and maneuverability.”

“It sounds like you're shoving pilots into tin cans and wishing them good luck.”

“I discussed this with Palpatine himself. He wants fast, disposal units. I worked over the design with Raith Sienar. If these prototypes perform well he'll put them into mass production.”

Those were impressive names, dropped casually. Equally casual, Grant said, “I thought you were working with KDY. You helped with the Eta-2, didn't you?”

“I work with whomever the Emperor awards research contracts to. You know that.”

“I'm sure Kuat is so pleased with you for stealing parts of their design.”

“I don't know what you mean,” Zaarin smirked.

Grant gave a little sigh. “So, are you here to oversee their first field operation?”

“And the *Eye*'s.”

“And why is that woman here? Is she *your* babysitter? Does Palpatine know you well enough not trust you?”

“Ameesa Darys is a former Jedi apprentice. She switched sides along with her master, a Miraluka named Jerec.”

“I suppose some Jedi must have had the good sense to save their own hides. How much do you trust her?”

“I trust her to fulfill her mission to the best of her abilities.”

“And what is her mission?”

“She has the same mission as the *Eye*,” Zaarin drummed thick fingers on the tabletop. “The Emperor believes he has found the largest hidden Jedi base left in the galaxy.”

Grant was unimpressed. He didn't like serving with Force-users and he didn't like fighting them either. They brought too many surprises either way.

“Where?” he asked.

“We're still trying to pin down the system, but we believe it is just outside the Senex and Juvex sectors.”

“The Senex and Juvex houses value their privacy. Is Palpatine willing to risk upsetting them in order to get his Jedi?” He needed to know how badly his own assets were going to get mixed up in this.

“She'll be picking up the Spaarti sleeper cells soon. By then we hope to locate the planet and attack.”

“Why the sleeper cells? It seems overly complicated, even for Palpatine.”

“The weapon was built in secret while the war was still going on. He couldn't afford to attract the attention of watchdogs in the Republic intel agencies. He didn't reveal it after the Empire was declared because there was be no point. If you have a secret weapon in your pocket it's smart to keep it there until you absolutely need it.”

Zaarin had the tone of a leacturer and Grant hated it. “Why does he bring it out here, now? I would think he'd

want to use something more reliable if he's going after so great a prize."

"That is where your people come in. You're to provide a unit of capital ships to escort and defend."

"My resources are limited, *Commodore*. We still haven't settled all the hold-outs and I don't want to pull my units away from Farstine and other main bases."

"These orders come right from Palpatine, *Admiral*," Zaarin said pointedly.

Grant ran over options in his head. If the Jedi-hunting mission failed, blame would fall in a lot of different directions, including his own. He also knew the ferocity of the Emperor's personal hatred for the Jedi; the destruction of their base would be worth more than the defense of Farstine or Bavinyar, or the prickly feelings of the Senex and Juvex aristocrats.

That made little sense from a strategic view, but as he'd gradually realized over the past year, Palpatine's priorities were as irrational and his plots were elaborate. It was a strange and potentially dangerous cocktail and he had to handle it carefully.

"I will select a task force to protect the *Eye*," Grant said. "Using my best officers."

"I told the Emperor he could depend on you." Zaarin gave a smug, satisfied smile.

"Did you now?"

"Oh yes," Zaarin nodded. "We'd like to send the *Eye* on her pick-up missions in approximately-"

The comlink in Grant's breast pocket started buzzing. The sound was alarming in the quiet, sealed space of the briefing room. Grant had told his crew to contact him only in extreme emergencies. He plucked out the comlink and, careful not to show Zaarin his stress, said, "Admiral Grant speaking. Report."

"Admiral, we have an emergency report from Yantor. They're under attack."

"By whom?" It had to have been Syne. She wasn't just picking off convoys, she was going after planetary bases. She was far braver than he'd expected.

"They're reporting two gunships and some starfighters. Sir, should we send backup?"

The time to balance priorities had jumped up sooner than expected. He said, "Negative. Unless Syne's dreadnaught shows up it's a feint. Put all ships in-system on red alert. Stand by for further instructions."

"Yes, sir."

Grant clicked off his comlink and looked at Zaarin. "Does this contraption have a bridge?"

"Something like it," the commodore allowed. "Shall I put us on red alert too?"

"Please." Grant pocketed the comlink and stood up. "This is probably the die-hards I was talking about. They might jut be feinting at Yantor but they might be coming here too. Are you certain you weren't compromised?"

"*You* didn't know about the *Eye*," Zaarin said.

It was true enough. He wondered if he shouldn't tell Zaarin to jump the *Eye* away in case Syne did show up; she'd clearly be interested in the giant battle station. *Eye*'s raw firepower should take down Syne's dreadnaught in minutes, assuming the so-called Will worked as promised.

"Tell me, is this contraption ready for a test-run?"

"I'll have to check with Mr. Keldor, but I believe the Will has synchronized with the armament systems. It should be combat-ready."

His comlink buzzed again, too quickly. He knew what they'd say before he answered.

"Grant here. Report."

"Syne's dreadnaught has just entered the system."

"Who's the nearest convoy guard?"

A tiny pause. "That would be Captain Pellaeon, sir."

"Tell him to get over here *now*. We won't let her escape. Tell the interdictor to fire up its gravity well. We're going to end it here."

"Yes, sir!"

Grant turned off the comlink and looked at Zaarin. "Take me to your 'bridge.' Let's see if this monstrosity is worth the credits we've dumped on it."

The moment *Iconoclast* dropped out of hyperspace, A'Sharad Hett knew something was wrong. So did Syne; he felt her shock ripple in the Force even as he sat in the cockpit of his Headhunter, waiting to launch. The portal of the dreadnaught's hangar bay was suddenly filled with the brown sphere of the planet, the discs of the main orbital defense station, the steel-gray capital ships of Admiral Grant's fleet-

-and a massive asteroid hanging in outer orbit.

Hett immediately dialed the bridge on his comlink. "This is Twin Suns Lead. What *is* that thing?"

He had to wait four long seconds for a response; the original battle plan was to launch Twin Suns Squadron two seconds after reversion to realspace. Whatever it was, it had caught everyone by surprise.

"Twin Lead, hold in the hangar," Yvolton said finally.

"What do scanners show?"

"That's no asteroid. Not any more, anyway. We're getting some signs of artificial emplacements on the object. It seems to be some kind of base, possibly a mobile weapons platform."

"Did the attack at Yantar draw any ships away?"

There was a short pause; he heard Syne and Madrisk arguing in the background. "Negative, Twin Lead."

"What about the drag ship?"

"It's powering gravity wells."

"We need to get out. *Now*."

"I completely agree, Twin Lead. However-"

"We go as planned." Syne suddenly sounded in his headset, loud and clear.

"Jereveth!" He snapped, "We can't-"

"Andrein, give the signal. Vortex and Twin Sun Squads, launch *now*."

The comm shut off abruptly. Hett swore in the privacy of his cockpit and fired up his Headhunter's engines. The hangar mouth filled with the blazing thrust trails of Vortex Squad's Y-wing and R-41 attack craft. Two dozen red lights flared and twelve starfighters shot out into space toward the looming asteroid.

Flight Control said in his ear, "Twin Suns, you're go."

"Copy." Hett switched his frequency. "Twin Suns, launch in three, two, one, *go*."

A full dozen ships rose as one. Twin Suns' losses from the last battle had been patched up with surviving fighters from *Defiance*'s wings, turning the squadron into an even messier patchwork than before. Hett's Z-95 Headhunter took the lead and was followed by a trail of Y-wings, A-6s, captured Eta-2s, even a dagger-shaped Delta-7b like the kind Hett himself had flown for much of the war.

"Would you look at the size of that thing!" Twin Eleven marveled as the asteroid- the *thing*- filled their forward viewports.

"What are we *doing* here?" snapped Twin Three, one of the newcomers from *Defiance*. "We can't take on *that*!"

"Shut the chatter!" Hett snapped and checked his scanners. The *thing* sat between *Iconoclast*'s flotilla and the massive three-ringed space station that Grant had refitted as his sector command center. A new *Immobilizer*-class cruiser, wedge-shaped and fat with twin gravity well projector spheres, sat in Farstine's outer orbit. Meanwhile, one *Venator*-class destroyer was cutting toward the dreadnaught's port flank while three more were curving around from the far side of the planet. Not long ago he'd found confidence in the presence of those dagger-hulled, twin-towered vessels; Now the very sight of them was a death sentence.

Before Hett could call *Iconoclast* for orders, something flashed into being behind the asteroid's bulk. He

immediately registered a CR90 Corellian Corvette, hull painted the regal deep red of an old Judicial craft, a handful of pickets, a broad flat SoroSuub *Quasar Fire*-class fleet carrier disgorging fighters, and most amazingly of all, long and lean *Recusant*-class destroyer. The sight of the Commerce Guild behemoth would have meant doom two years ago; now it meant salvation. He'd never get used to it.

A transmission, loud and scratchy, came over his helmet. "Attention scum-sucking Imperial maggots in general and Octavian Grant in particular!" A man shouted, "We are the Sons and Daughters of Freedom and we are here to help the bold and beautiful Lady Syne kick your sorry butts back to Coruscant!"

"Who the *kark* is that?" Twin Suns Three spat.

"A friend," Hett explained. "His name's Zozridor Slayke."

"I want to shake that man's hand," Twin Suns Nine said.

"Then shut up and stay alive. One Flight, on me. We're going to buzz that asteroid. Two and Three Flights, stick with Vortex. Leave the drag ship to Slayke, we need to handle those fighter screens."

"Lead, I'm getting fighters coming out of that *thing*," Twin Suns Five said. "Nothing I've seen before."

Hett checked his scanners. Some three dozen small spacecraft were spilling out of a cavernous hangar on the asteroid's port side and his computer couldn't identify them."

"Keep them off Syne, whatever they are," Hett said. "Twin Suns, break!"

He snapped his Headhunter into a starboard roll. The gentle pull of Farstine's gravity accelerated his fall and quickly pulled him and his three wingmen out of the spray of green laser blasts the incoming fighters were spitting out.

"They're *fast!*" Twin Suns Six said over the comlink.

"Karking hard to shoot too," said Eleven.

"Flight One, narrow comm freqs," Hett ordered, and shut off non-priority communications from everyone except his

wingmen. All three pilots clicked agreement. Hett pointed the nose of his fighter toward the asteroid and kicked it into motion. Space lit up with lasers and explosions between the giant chunk of rock and Syne's flotilla, while beyond them, in outer orbit, the drag ship was getting pounded by the motley newcomers. Hett checked his scanners: at least now those Venators were going after Slayke's fleet, not Syne's.

He focused his attention on the asteroid. Turbolaser emplacements scattered across the rocky exterior opened fire on the approaching fighters. Hett's flight began juking back and forth, and at that distance they had no problem evading the heavy blasts from turbolaser emplacements designed for long-range bombardments, not anti-star-fighter defense.

"Forward shields on max," he warned them. "Arm your heavy weapons. We're going to go in close."

He did a fast mental tally of his flight; he was in a Headhunter, Twin Suns Two in an A-6, Three in a Y-wing, and Four in an Eta-2. Three had the best odds of punching a hole through their defenses, but Y-wings were also sluggish, and that meant the others would have to stay tight around him to absorb anti-starcraft fire.

It would have helped if Hett knew what kind of defenses the asteroid had, or anti-fighter weapons, but the universe, as he'd already learned, wasn't that gracious.

"Close formation," he warned them as they drew within a kilometer of the asteroid's belly. The turbolasers were getting more accurate at this range.

"Lead, what are we aiming for?" asked Two.

It was a damned good question. "We're going to hug the surface and climb to the top. Look for a command or communications tower. Stay low."

The rocky surface rushed to meet them quickly. Hett pulled his fighter's nose back to execute a belly-flop that nearly threw his guts out of his throat. The others fighters, even Three's Y-wing, executed the same maneuver so that

all four were hugging the asteroid just above its particle shields, well out of range of its turbolaser towers, while Farstine's bright glow filled the space over their heads.

Hett made sure his sensors were recording everything as they raced across the surface. They followed the rugged curve of the asteroid's body, around its starboard side, so that Farstine still filled their upper viewports. That placed the rest of the battle- Syne, Slayke, the brawl between old snubfighters and new ones- temporarily out of sight and sensor range.

"Don't see any arrays. No comm towers," Twin Suns Two reported. "Must all be up top."

"We'll be there in a moment," Hett said. "Arm your torps and get ready."

They curved onto the roof of the asteroid. In the distance they could see explosions and lancing laser-blasts flare in upper orbit. Hett tore his attention away from Slayke's slugfest and spotted a series of tall, thick towers jutting up near the fore of the asteroid.

"Adjust course, fifty degrees port," he ordered. The starfighters, still skimming just above the shields, angled for the towers.

"Lead, identify targets," Two requested.

There was no outer way of telling which tower held simple communications equipment and which held the ship's command staff, or even Admiral Grant. Hett took a moment to reach beyond himself in the Force; he felt the anxiety and concentration of his pilots, then the distant but greater agonies of all the beings fighting and dying in Farstine's orbit. He tried to reach into the asteroid itself and feel the thousands of lives that must have been huddled inside-

-but he found nothing. It was empty inside; not full of stone, but hollow with halls and cabins and bulkheads that echoed only faintly with the residue of sentient life.

He didn't understand, but he didn't have time to understand. The command towers were coming up fast and

nearby defensive gunnery stations, smaller and more precise than the turbolasers, were starting to fire. He reached out to the towers and groped for any sign of living beings.

He found them in the center tower. He felt confidence, confusion, consternation, just like you'd find in any beings watching any battle over any planet.

"Middle tower!" He shouted. "Arm your torps! Get-"

Then something touched him back.

The towers raced to meet him but he couldn't budge his stick, couldn't fix his aim, couldn't even breath. Some mind- cool, concentrated, but *surprised*- found his and held it.

Who are you? He tried to send his thoughts across the fast-shrinking void. *What* is *this thing?*

"Lead, do we have weapons free?" Two was shouting. "Lead, *respond*!"

"Weapons go!" He snapped, jerking his mind free. "Fire! Fire!"

He dropped his reticule on the bar of lights atop the tower and fired. Three lobbed a double-payload of concussion missiles while Two shot off another set of torps. They pulled up as one, and defensive fire arced to either side of them, and for a second Hett thought they'd dodged the blasts completely.

Then Twin Suns Four exploded. Two swore. Three started shouting that his port engine was hit. Hett gunned his thrusters, taking them away from the asteroid and toward Syne's flotilla, but his eyes were glued to the scanners as the projectiles raced to their target.

The first set of torps impacted harmlessly against the command tower's reinforced shielding. He held his breath, hoping Four's ones would go through, or at least tear a hole for Three's missiles, but they just impacted, one after another. He shifted in his seat and tried to look back, and he could just barely see the last glow a fiery flower, dying fast against the tower's defensive shields.

Then that mind, cool and concentrated but no longer surprised, brushed his. It said without words: *We're coming for you, Jedi, we're coming for* all *of you.*

As quickly as it had come to him it was gone. Then he was lancing away from the asteroid toward Syne's fleet. Twin Suns Two was clinging to his exhaust, while behind them Three's Y-wing tumbled into the asteroid's shields and exploded, harmless again.

The fire from four double-sets of explosions took a moment to burn out, but when it finally did the view from *Eye of Palpatine*'s operations tower was the same as it had been before. A few sparks of energy still danced across the shields like luminous flitgnats, but those, too, died quickly, revealing the curve of Farstine's surface and the starfield above it.

"I have to admit," Grant said, arms crossed as he stood between Keldor and Zaarin, "Your targeting software for the defensive cannons is most effective."

"We've run numerous simulations with drones. I'm pleased to see they're holding their own against live targets." Keldor said, clearly satisfied.

"How does the computer identify enemy ships?"

"We have IFF beacons places aboard each TIE fighter," Zaarin said. "The gunnery system knows when to hold its fire."

"It's all part of the Will," Keldor held out one arm to encompass the command deck, if something with so sparse a staff could be called that. Most of the humans onboard were technicians rather than actual crewmen, observing and measuring the ship's elaborate computer systems rather that commanding it. The giant battle moon had less than fifty beings on it, all told, and every one of them could be considered nonessential.

It still seemed like a potential weak spot to Grant. Despite its impressive performance thus far, the *Eye* still struck him as a colossal accident waiting to happen. Trusting to

mindless automatons hadn't done the Separatists much good in the end, nor had Jedi trusting clones, but for some reason Palpatine seemed interested in following the path laid down by his defeated enemies. The man's motives were hard to fathom as always, and once again he wondered whether his new Emperor was a genius or just a madman.

And of course, he also didn't like to be thought of as nonessential.

He was about to ask another question when Ameesa Darys spoke up. She said, “I'm not alone.”

Grant frowned in confusion. She'd spoken only a handful of sentences since he'd come aboard and even now she lingered on the edge of the command deck, staring out at the stars, not even turning to face them. Grant hadn't worked with many Jedi in the war, thankfully, and Darys's air of aloof mysticism was getting on his nerves.

Zaarin, to his credit, seemed a little better at handling Palpatine's pet Force-user. “Are more enemy fighters approaching?”

Darys shook her head and pressed a fingertip against the cool transparisteel, like she was pointing out something only she could see. “They have a Jedi among them.”

“A Jedi?” Grant stiffened. “Where?”

“In one of the ship's that attacked us.” Darys turned, finally. “He survived. He's fleeing back to Syne's ship. He didn't expect to find me here.”

“Did you expect him?” Zaarin asked.

Darys shook her head and turned back to stare at the stars. Grant didn't know what to think. Having a Jedi in her pocket might have been why Jereveth Syne still eluded him, but he couldn't very well use that as an excuse for the Emperor; at least, not while the Jedi was still alive.

“Admiral!” A technician standing at *Eye*'s comm station said, “We're getting an emergency signal from *Immobilizer*. She's under heavy fire and requests permission to withdraw.”

Unlike a proper warship, *Eye* had no tactical stations to monitor the surrounding battle. He'd done his best to relay orders to Farstine's defense fleet from the command deck, even when Zozridor Slayke had shown up with his entire fleet, including the Separatist destroyer he'd captured at the end of the war. The last Grant had heard, Slayke's rogue fleet, pro-republic but anti-Empire, had been fighting with Aqualish rebels in the Noolian Sector; how he'd hooked up with Syne he didn't know, but he had some intel agents to punish when this was all over.

Worst of all, he was now on the verge of losing his only interdictor because he was trapped and half-blind inside Keldor and Zaarin's mad contraption. Even the viewport was facing Farstine and therefore utterly useless.

"Tell her negative. I want her to keep her gravwells up and drop into lower orbit. We'll use *Eye*'s guns to protect her."

"This station hasn't been tested against capital ships," Keldor sounded anxious.

Grant wanted to snap at the preening child who'd dragged them into this mess, but he knew if he did it would get back to the Emperor, probably three times over, so instead he smiled a little and said, "You wanted a proper field test, didn't you? I'm sure *Eye* will hold out."

"We'll need to recall the TIEs to protect *Immobilizer*," Zaarin said.

"Then by all means, do it," Grant turned back to the communications station. "Where is Captain Pellaeon? He should have showed up by now."

"I'm not sure, Admiral. I can, ah, try to-"

Suddenly the entire deck shuddered. Farstine's bright brown face seemed to lurch closer and Grant's stomach threatened to leap through his chest; then they were still again.

Keldor looked confused but Zaarin outright swore. He knew what it felt like when a gravity well suddenly

disappeared and a ship's artificial grav systems struggled to compensate.

"What happened to *Immobilizer*?" Grant stalked over to the comm station. "Can she get her wells online?"

"I, ah, don't know, sir..." The comm officer looked flustered and he fumbled with *Eye*'s strange consoles. "I think um... I think she's gone, Admiral."

Grant had just enough self-control to keep from cursing. "What about Slayke's people?"

"It's hard to tell, Admiral. It seems they're ah, inbound."

"Are they coming after *Eye*?" Keldor was on the verge of panic.

"It very much seems so." Grant sneered at the young man. "It seems you'll get all the field test you wanted."

"This battlemoon was designed for orbital bombardments, not prolonged space-based-"

"TIEs are on their way back," Zaarin interjected. "Should we have the other destroyers form on us?"

Grant wanted to say no, send all three to preserve the command station and let the 'battlemoon' battle for itself, but that, too, would get back to Palpatine and wreck his career.

He opened his mouth for a reluctant 'yes' when Darys turned from the viewport, gave a frankly disturbing smile, and said, "Don't worry, Admiral. You're not alone either."

Gilad Pellaeon had no idea what to expect when *Valediction* jumped to hyperspace on a vector for Farstine and had prepared himself for unhappy surprises. When the starlines fell away and the battle swelled in the forward viewport, he was still shocked beyond words. The fiery remains of Grant's sole interdictor were falling slowly through Farstine's orbit and into its atmosphere. Syne's dreadnaught and her support vessels were sitting on one side of the battle zone while a larger, equally motley fleet was racing to join them. In the center seemed to be an

asteroid kept in stationary orbit by the blaze of massive thrust engines attached to its stony bulk.

Surprise rippled audibly through the crew behind him. Pellaeon spun on his heel and mustered all the authority he could. “Eyes on your consoles, people! Tactical, give me a sitrep! Comm, I need a line to Admiral Grant. Guns, stand by for orders.”

“Captain, we've got IFF on the asteroid. It's a friendly.” Vernedet called from the tactical station.

“Comm, can you buzz it?”

“Trying, sir. We- Sir! Incoming from Admiral Grant! He's on that asteroid, sir!”

“Then maybe this will all make sense.” Pellaeon stalked over to the comm station, picked up a headset, and slapped it on. “Lieutenant, patch me a private line.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pellaeon pressed the speaker into his ear as he strode back toward the viewport. There was a series of sharp clicks as the connection ran through the proper encryption sequence, and then Grant's clipped voice came in clear.

“Captain Pellaeon, what is your status?”

“*Valediction* and *Salvation* are standing by with full fighter wings. Waiting for orders.” Pellaeon desperately wanted to know what in the nine Corellian hells was going on, but he could find out later. Right now he had to *act*.

“Concentrate all fire on the largest rebel fleet,” Grant's voice betrayed rare tension. “The Commerce Guild ship is top priority.”

Pellaeon squinted at the distant capital ships. The lights from their engines were flaring up, indicating a change in direction. “Admiral, it looks like they're adjusting course. They may be making a run for it.”

“I'm glad *someone* knows what's going on,” Grant said bitterly. “Try to head them off. Again, that *Recusant*-class is top priority.”

“Understood, sir,” Pellaeon lied. “*Valediction* out.”

The moment he took off the headset he noticed Vernedet hanging over his shoulder. The man snapped a quick salute, then said, “Captain, *Iconoclast* is recalling her fighters. They're making a run for it.”

“Our orders are to stop the larger fleet.”

“Who *are* they? And what is-”

Pellaeon silenced him with a gesture, and Vernedet, being the good officer that he was, didn't even try to ask more questions.

Like his captain, he did as he was told.

The rest of the battle went quickly. *Valediction* and *Salvation* soared ahead and began to fire on the larger fleet. The smaller vessels crowded around the big Techo Union ship and all of them cut a straight line out of Farstine's gravity well. *Valediction* adjusted course to intercept them at a right angle but they jumped away just as Pellaeon was bringing his guns to bear. He’d been unable to destroy a single enemy ship.

Syne's smaller fleet took a few losses. Starfighters, of a make Pellaeon had never seen before, destroyed one of her corvettes and a number of her snubfighters before *Iconoclast*, too, jumped to hyperspace. The strange ships swarmed back into the massive hangar bays built into the sides of the asteroid.

Meanwhile the interdictor's remains, forgotten in the battle's frantic closing stage, fell into the planet's atmosphere. It was a massive vessel and it blazed like a comet as it broke and scattered into a thousand arcs of soaring debris.

Pellaeon watched all of it from *Valediction*'s bridge. A strange silence fell over the crew as the interdictor's embers burned out; partly mournful but mostly just confused.

There were times when a captain had to pretend like he knew what he was doing, and this was one of them. Standing at the head of the bridge Pellaeon said, “Good job, gentlemen. The Farstine System is secure once again.

Recall all fighters. Engines and guns, stand by. We might be going after them. Communications, request a line to Admiral Grant."

A little kick was enough to get people moving. He walked over the communications station and studiously avoided eye contract with anyone. He picked up the headset again and put it against his ear.

"I'm ready when you are, Comm."

"Yes, sir. The Admiral is standing by."

He waited a moment for the secure connection to come through. "Admiral Grant, this is Captain Pellaeon. Do you want us to pursue?"

Something crackled over his headset; it might have been a sigh. Then Grant said, "Negative, Captain Pellaeon. Let them go."

"I understand," he said, though once more he didn't. From what he could tell, Syne had found an even meaner friend and together they'd destroyed one of the sector fleet's most valuable ships and got away with minimal losses of their own. It was the kind of insult Grant would normally have been eager to avenge.

"Captain, prepare a shuttle shuttle to the command station. You're to come alone in two hours."

"Yes, sir. Is that all?"

"For now, yes."

Grant closed the connection without a farewell, leaving Pellaeon more confused than ever. Vernedet met his eyes from across the bridge and his face was full of questions. Pellaeon shook his head. He had no answers to give.

7

"Kyrimorut was a haven, a refuge, and a home. All of us knew, deep down, we'd have to leave it one day, but none of us were prepared when the time came. If we hadn't been so happy there, things might have ended differently."

Darman was in the blastboat's pilot seat when it reverted to realspace, and Niner stood beside him, one hand on the back of his chair, watching as Mandalore suddenly resolved before them. It was a planet Niner had heard spoken of with a nigh-religious reverence both by his father and his errant brothers, as though there was something in this world's soil that contained the essential Mandalorian spirit that was encoded in their genes.

From outer orbit, though, it looked like just another planet: some browns, some greens, some blues, some wisps of cloud-white. Niner's initial disappointment lasted only a minute: somewhere on this planet was their family, and wherever family was, they had a home.

The idea of desertion had never been easy for Niner. He was a little closer to the Deltas than the other Omegas in that respect. He'd never yearned for a "normal life" like Fi and never known a woman like Dar or Atin, and he honestly didn't even know what he'd *do* once he got to Mandalore.

But it didn't matter. As he stood behind Darman and stared at the plain brown planet in front of them, he knew he could never go back to Triple Zero again.

"Well," Niner said, "Do you want to do the honors, Dar?"

“Sure, why not?” His brother took a second to respond. He must have been transfixed by Mandalore too.

Darman had taken the special transceiver in his helmet and patched it into the blastboat's comm system. He'd done it in such a way that the blastboat's onboard computer wouldn't be able to record the frequency and, if someone got the vessel and somehow checked the comm logs, they'd only see unknown calls to an unknown destination. It was a way to keep their secure line to Nulls in tact without alerting Rede, who currently sat at the rear of the cabin near the auxiliary controls. He wasn't staring at Mandalore like they were, he was doing checks of the ship's backup systems, like the planet wasn't there at all.

It was going to be tougher to de-program, or re-program, the younger clone than Dar thought, but right now Niner was ready to just shoot him with a stun blast and save the tricky stuff for later.

First, though, Darman had to call home. Just to make sure someone was waiting for them before they turned traitor.

“Base, is anyone there? Repeat, base, this is Blastboat Omega-One, are you there?”

Dull static crackled over the comm. Niner glanced over his shoulder at Rede; still doing checks. He looked back at the planet and saw a handful of ships in her orbit. They were too far away to make out specific classes but he didn't see anything larger than a freighter or light cruiser, and that was a good sign.

Suddenly there was in increase in static. A voice said, “We have you, Omega-One. State your position.”

It was either Jaing or Mereel; Niner couldn't tell which. Whoever it was, he was keeping his speech pattern crisp and formal, devoid of the typical wisecracks. He'd explained the situation in his last talk with Mandalore, including the need to feign formality, at least until they could be sure they weren't being tracked.

“We’ve just entered outer orbit,” said Darman. “Ready to move forward on your mark.”

"Copy. Sending coordinates now."

Darman glanced at his screen. "Base, they're in the system. Omega-One out."

Darman clicked off the comlink and blew out a long breath, hands dangling at his sides. Niner clapped him on the shoulder and whispered, "Almost home, *ner vod*."

Niner felt joy surge in his heart, but Darman just nodded grimly.

Then Rede asked, "Do we have the coordinates for the Jedi?"

"That's right," Niner said. Carefully, he unclipped the latch on his hip holster, but he didn't go for his pistol, not yet.

"Understood." Rede's fingers danced over his console's keyboard.

Something flashed on Dar's screen and he jerked upright. "What was what? What did you send?"

"I just relayed the coordinates to the local garrison," Rede said. "Captain Melusar made sure they had a ship in orbit ready to go. They should get to the target first."

"*What*?" Darman nearly shouted.

Rede frowned in honest confusion. "I'm sorry, but these orders came last-minute from the captain. He said to keep them to myself."

Darman stared. Niner felt the pistol's grip press against his palm but had no idea if he should pull it out and fire. He had no idea what to do at all.

"Is there a problem?" Rede blinked. "Don't we *want* backup when we go against the Jedi?"

Something beeped on the blastboat's proximity sensors. Niner looked out the viewport and saw the gray disc of an IPV-0 patrol craft quickly growing larger ahead.

A new voice crackled over the cabin's speakers: "Attention, unidentified vessel, transmit identification or you will be fired upon."

Darman clasped the throttle but he didn't punch it forward. His hands were shaking.

Behind them Rede said, “Transmitting our code now.” When he was done he put his hands in his lap and swiveled his chair to face Niner and Darman. “Don't worry, once this is cleared we should be free to approach our destination. I believe the garrison troops are almost at the location now, but hopefully there will be some targets left for us to kill.”

He smiled politely, as though oblivious to the anger and shock on Niner's face.

As for Darman, he looked like he wanted to scream.

They came for us right before dawn. After that long night barely anyone was awake, and those who were were totally unprepared. The only thing that saved us was the thing that doomed us: Darman's call from his ship in orbit.

The call came in via the communications system Jaing and Mereel had installed on *Cornucopia,* which in turn was connected to their personal cominks via short-range wireless relay. Their call ended up rousing Mereel out of bed, but as soon as he got off the line he hurried over to *Kal'buir*'s quarters to get him up. Jaing hurried over and woke me.

When the first shuttle approached we knew it wasn't Darman; it came too soon. The pre-dawn sky over Kyrimorut ran an east-to-west spectrum of violets and rosy reds down to blackness and starlight, and we heard something coming from the east without seeing it, which meant that somebody was staying low to the treeline to avoid being spotted.

Kal'buir didn't hesitate. He ordered Jaing and Mereel to bring up the particle shields over the hangar compound and told me to sound the alarm. None of us hesitated either. If we had, if we'd allowed ourself to think *maybe that's Darman after all, we'll be okay*, then even more would have died; maybe all of us.

The compound looked like a disconnected tangle of small sheds strewn around the *karyai*'s central hut, but as always, there was more to *Kal'buir*'s creation than met the eye.

Underground tunnels connected lot of the buildings and all of them were networked into a short-range wireless comm net. That was what I triggered. Alarms starting wailing like banshees in the pre-dawn gloom. They even drowned out the roar of the Imperial shuttle as it soared over the clearing and past it, toward a landing zone by the lake.

We'd gone through emergency drills, but the real thing is always different. People react in different ways to sudden stress. All six Nulls appeared within a minute of the first alarm, every one of them in full armor. Vau showed up right after, Lord Mird on his heels, and both of them looked ready to kill. Maze and Key popped into the *karyai* next, they looked ready for battle too even if they didn't have any *beskar'gam* to wear.

Others reacted slower. Some slept in sheds without tunnels and had to risk crossing the field. As I sprinted out of the *karyai* with the Nulls to start laying mines around the clearing's perimeter, Uthan and Scout were racing toward it. The girl's blue lightsaber bobbed in the dark and I wanted to shout at her, tell her she was making herself a target, but she was too far away.

We didn't have time to do anything fancy with the mines. We just shoved them into the soil cap-up, hidden by shrubbery when we could, then ran back to the *karyai* before remote-activating them. We got back into the compound just before the first one got triggered. The boom of the explosion echoed through the clearing and a gout of black smoke poured up into the sky.

Then they started shooting from the treeline. In the darkness they were hard to see, but the Nulls had IR sensors in their *buy'ce* and Verpine sniper rifles to go along with them, so they were the ones who crawled on their armored bellies into the high grass and began picking off the enemy where they could.

Of course, *they* had the same gear as us.

The inside of the *karyai* was pandemonium. People were crowding in and Skirata was trying to get a head count

before he led the exodus through the tunnel to the hangar. Kina Ha's head bobbed on its long stalk above the rest; Scout and Uthan were there; Besany held you tight against her chest. You were a brave boy, *Kad'ika*; you weren't even crying.

"Where's Jilka?" Corr was shouting. "Where is she?"

"We're missing Laseema and Atin," Fi reported.

"I need to get to my lab!" Uthan repeated over and over.

I zeroed in on her. Grabbing her with both hands, shaking some sense into her, I said, "What do we need to save more clones? What do we *absolutely* need?"

"I know what we need," Gilamar appeared behind him. The friendly country doctor was gone. He was all gold armor and determination.

"I'll come with you," I said.

"Me too!" Scout piped, though her hands were shaking and her knuckles were white as she clasped her turned-off lightsaber in front of her. There was the boom of another mine going off, and she flinched.

Even without the fear pouring off her in the Force, I knew she'd be no good in the fight. I said, "Protect Kina Ha and Uthan. Follow *Kal'buir* and get to the hangar. *Mij'ika*, you're with me."

"I'm coming too," someone said, and to my surprise it was Vau. I stared at the black mask of his helmet, tried to touch him in the Force, but I could read nothing of his intentions.

"Okay," I breathed, "All three of us."

"Four of us," Vau patted Mird's shoulders.

I wanted to tell him this was going to be no fight for a strill; then I figured that ugly beast had been through its share and would probably outlive us all.

"Okay," I said, "Let's go. *Oya.*"

"We're still missing Jilka!" Corr shouted as we moved for the door.

"Laseema and *At'ika* too," Fi said.

"We'll try to get the stragglers," Zey said as he affixed one of the spare comm headsets around his right ear. Maze was right behind him. Somehow, both of them had found black plasteel vests, which wasn't *beskar*, but it was better than nothing.

"That ain't a lot of armor, pops," Corr told him as he pushed his own battered clone commando helmet over his face.

"I have the Force." Zey took out his lightsaber and ignited it, silencing all argument with its snap, hiss, and hum.

"Okay, enough of this," I said. "Lets go. *Oya*!"

"*Oya!*" Gilimar and Vau bellowed, and we plunged out into the firefight.

Dawn was coming fast. Violet and rose had spread to the west, canceling out starlight, while the east was turning a deep blue. No sun had crested the forest yet and the trees around the clearing were shapeless and black.

We ran in a straight line: me, Gilamar, Vau, Mird. I heard the hum of Zey's lightsaber behind me but didn't look back as he, Corr, and Maze went running for Jilka's shed. There was another boom as a mine went off behind us, but in front of us they were still pumping lasers, so we sprinted with our heads low and targets small.

There was another explosion in the middle of the field; someone was lobbing grenades too. We ducked behind the smoking ruin of what I realized was the manure shed we'd cured Maze in. Gilamar ducked low, plucked a grenade from his belt, and lobbed it toward the treeline. The explosion rocked the earth and triggered a mine for a second explosion.

We used the smoke and heat for cover and raced for Uthan's shed. Lasers from the direction of the *karyai* whipped past us toward the treeline; suppression fire from one of the Nulls.

When we got to the shed Gilamar rammed into it shoulder-first and smashed the wooden door off its hinges.

Vau stayed outside and dropped to his knees, popping out covering fire while Gilamar and I scoured the shed.

Gilamar moved fast. He grabbed equipment I didn't even recognize- vials of liquid, cell sample dishes, surgical tools, data-cards- and shoved them into carrying cases one after another. I didn't even notice he was bleeding from beneath his left ribcage until he let out a cry of pain and slumped against Uthan's work bench.

"*Mij'ika*! You're hurt!"

"Took a stray. Slipped between the armor," Gilamar grunted and tried to straighten himself. The fabric between his *beskar* plates were darkened with blood. "I'll be okay, Walon! Get your *shebs* in here! Need you to carry stuff!"

Before Vau could appear there was the boom of an explosion and a massive concussive blast. The far wall of the shed exploded and knocked both of us to our feet. My comm turned to static and slabs of smoking timber pounded my *beskar'gam.* My *buy'c* canceled out the deafening effect of the grenade-blast but it also played merry hell with my sensors. My IR viewer went crazy and I fumbled to switch it back to visual.

I saw a Mandalorian in dark gray armor standing over me, dim against the red of the sky. He was bringing his rifle to bear when another shadow blurred across my vision; then both were gone.

I rolled to one side and pushed myself up. I had a couple dozen kilos of wreckage on me but with the Force I was able to get upright. I looked down to see Lord Miradalan straddling the gray-armored Mando; its teeth tore through the soft padding around the man's neck and blood spouted into the air. I recognized the Death Watch crest on the dying man's shoulder and wasn't surprised.

I smacked my helmet, like that would clear my comm, and shouted, "Vau? *Mij'ika*? Respond!"

Laser blasts whipped around me. Old instincts kicked in and I pulled my lightsaber from my belt to deflect them. A

half-dozen black forms were running toward me from the treeline, and all were firing.

Vau's voice came over my headset: “I got the gear! I got the gear!”

I glanced to one side and saw Vau's black-armored form on its knees, shifting through the wreckage of the shed. I reached out with the Force and tossed some of the smoking wood planks into the air.

“Well *shab*,” Vau muttered, “That works too.”

“*Mij'ika*!” I called. The Death Watch thugs were getting closer. “Where are you? *Mij'ika*?”

A voice groaned over my headset. “Get your *shebs* out of here, both of you.”

“Where are you?”

I spotted gold-armor peeking through more debris. Gilamar was trying to rise. I lowered by saber and ducked close to him. As I pulled his leg out from beneath the wreckage I could immediately tell it was mangled.

“No way I'm running with this,” Gilamar groaned. “Oh, *shab, shab, shab.* Tell Kal I'm sorry. Sorry for calling the whole *shabla* Death Watch down...”

I tried to shove my shoulder beneath his armpit and lift him up. “Come on, *Mij'ika*, we can do it! We can get you home!”

“Do you have it?”

“I've got some,” Vau said. “*Bard'ika*, I'm gonna need your hands!”

“We're not leaving you!” I shouted to Gilamar, but the man shook his head.

“Do it! Save Uthan! Save your *vode!*”

“We're not-”

“Do it, Bardan!” Vau snapped.

Lasers whipped over my head. I barely ducked in time. Some explosion went off; a mine or grenade, I couldn't tell.

“Fall back!” Vau shouted. “Now!”

He gathered Uthan's equipment in both his arms and ran. Mirdalan bounded after him. I grabbed the remaining

equipment with one hand, cradled it against my chest, and kept my lightsaber blazing in the other. Then I ran, too.

I dared look back when we were halfway to the *karyai*. A half-dozen Death Watch were approaching the wreckage of the shed. I didn't see Gilamar but I knew he was there. I turned and ran. The blast from his last grenade lit up the sky and shook the field behind me but I didn't see that either.

Maze found Jilka in the tall grass five meters from her shed. She was lying face-down with smoke still rising from the scorch mark between her shoulder-blades. When he prodded her shoulder her head rolled to one side and the pale profile of her face reflected the rosy light in the sky. He remembered sideways glances of her mouth, twisted in a sour frown at having found herself stranded among strangers, or relaxed into a reluctant smile after Corr or Jaing cracked a joke.

Then he heard the thunder of a nearby explosion and pushed Jilka from his mind. He called into his comlink, "Jilka is *down*, repeat, Jilka is terminated."

He heard Corr swore. "Are you sure?"

"No pulse. I'm sorry."

Zey's voice cut in over Corr's continued swearing. "We're with Atin and Laseema. She took a stray round to the thigh."

"Can you move her?"

"I'm *trying*!" someone said, probably Atin.

"Stand by. I'll help cover."

"Look for us-"

"I see you," Maze said. The blazing green light of Zey's lightsaber was at once a shield against laser blasts and a beacon to them. They seemed to be pinned down behind the wreckage of Atin and Laseema's burnt-down shed.

Maze switched his comlink to its secondary frequency. "Nulls, this is Maze? You copy?"

"We copy, Maze. Sitrep?" one of them said, he didn't know which.

"Jilka's dead, Laseema's wounded. Trying to extract. She's with Zey."

"Hard to miss," someone said. "We'll lay down covering fire. Get ready to run."

"I'm forty meters east, in the grass."

"We'll keep that in mind. Go in ten."

"Affirmative. In ten."

He didn't think the Nulls would shoot him, not intentionally, but even if the sky was gaining light the clearing was still deep in shadow, and the strobing flashes of explosions and laster-blasts turned the battlefield into a surreal blur of color and darkness.

Maze switched back to Zey's frequency. "Get ready to run, eight seconds."

"Understood, Maze. We're ready."

He heard something cutting through the field to his right. He spun around and saw the dark form of a Mandalorian charging right at him. He fired a spray of blasts before he could raise his DC properly- stupid, amateurish- and his shots cut through the grass at knee-height. One of them caught the charging Mando across the thigh, scoring *beskar* and fabric and flesh. The man fumbled with his rifle and plunged head-first into the gras only a few meters from Maze.

Someone shouted, "*Shab* it, Maze! *Shab shab shab!*"

And Zey: "Go now! Go now!"

"What happened?" Maze pressed her headset to his ear. Laserfire filled the clearing to the east of him, and Zey's luminous blade cut arcs through the dark air.

"You *shabla* shot Ordo!" one of the Nulls shouted.

"Oh, fierfek," Maze swore. "Stand by! I'll get him! I'll get him!"

Maze slung his rifle over his shoulder and crawled on all fours through the grass. He found Ordo lying not far ahead, struggling to sit upright. Maze pinned his shoulders to the

ground and said, “Hold on, I'll get you out of here. Hold on.”

Ordo's head flopped back and forth but he didn't make a sound. Maze wrestled his helmet off with both hands and got a faceful of *Mando'a* profanity, some directed at him and some at the busted leg.

“I've got this, Ordo, I've got this.”

“You shot me you *chakaar*!”

“I thought you were Death Watch!” Maze snapped and flicked his comlnk back on. “Are you there? Jaing? Mereel?”

“Kom'rk here. Do you have Ordo?”

“I've got him, it's just a leg wound. I'm sorry, I-”

“Save it, *shabuir*. Can you move him?”

“I'll need cover fire.”

“You've got it. Once you're in we're making an exit.”

“What about Zey and Corr and-”

“We've got 'em. Move it, soldier!”

Maze turned off the comlink and looked back at Ordo. “Are you okay to be carried?”

“Do I look like I have a *shabla* choice?”

Maze didn't bother to answer. He rolled Ordo onto his butt, then folded him over his shoulder and struggled to stand.

Either he'd gotten out of shape or *beskar* was too damn heavy. Probably both.

Laser blasts whizzed by. He lurched forward, Ordo's legs dangling in front of his chest. The *karyai* seemed infinitely close and infinitely far. Lights flashed in the grass, covering fire from hidden Nulls. Maze charged forward through the grass even as he felt his chest would burst from the pressure of the heavy body hanging off of him.

He literally fell through the doorway, Ordo with him. They clattered to the floor of the *karyai* as a mess of tangled limbs. Laseema and the Jedi were still there, circled around the uncovered pit in the middle of the room that gave access to the tunnels, and they turned as one to

gawk at the arrivals. As Maze and Ordo struggled to pull apart from each other the Nulls charged in behind them.

"No time for rough love, *vode*," Mereel said, "We're getting out of here."

The tunnels beneath the Kyrimorut compound were cramped and dark, and every time a mine or grenade shook the earth, clumps dirt tumbled from the walls and the basic timbered frame that held up the ceiling creaked and groaned. Scout tried to remind herself that most of the group had already gotten safely to the hangar; even Kina Ha had somehow managed to fit her long body through.

Ordo went first, helped on either shoulder by Mereel and Maze. Next went Laseema, their other walking wounded, with Corr and Atin supporting her. Scout and Zey, lightsabers blazing, brought up the rear along with A'den. The Null had his Verpine rifle unslung and somehow walked backwards across the tunnel's uneven surface. A pair of grenades dangled from his belt and Scout knew that if the tunnel was breached (and it probably would be soon now that they'd abandoned the *karyai*) A'den wouldn't hesitate to bring the whole thing down, no matter who was still inside.

Jilka was already dead. So was Gilamar. It didn't seem real; she knew but she couldn't believe. It was like her flight from the Temple during Order 66 all over again: people she knew and cared about were dying and there was nothing she could do except keep her head down and run for her life.

The pain of loss would come later.

Losing Gilamar, especially, was going to hurt. She knew that but she didn't feel the pain, not yet.

The tunnel shook around them. The panels of timbering shifted and chunks of heavy dirt fell on Scout's head and tangled in her hair.

"Are they in?" she rasped.

A'den shook his head. He was still walking backward. “When they come in, we'll know.”

“Are we almost there?” Zey asked.

“Should be close now.”

Scout jumped at the sound of blasterfire. It was coming from somewhere in the distance, somewhere up ahead.

“Oh, fierfek,” A'den groaned.

“What is it? Are they up ahead?” Zey said.

“They're in the hangar!” one of the Nulls shouted from up ahead.

“Can't stay here, *ner vod*,” A'den called. “Gotta get out.”

Another sound joined the whine of lasers, the whir and hum of a lightsaber.

“*Bard'ika*'s holding 'em off!” someone called. “Go go go!”

They carried Laseema and Ordo as fast as possible out of the tunnel mouth. Zey charged in behind them and Scout followed the flapping tail of his black robe. They jumped out into the middle of a firefight: laserfire bounced between the hangar's gray walls and the air smelled of smoke and ozone. One corner of the hangar had crumbled, its wall spilled open, and enemy soldiers were trying to advance inside. She thought she saw dark gray Mandalorian T-visor masks but she also the white helmets of clone commandos peeking through the smoking gap, illuminated by muzzle-flashes. Two big freighters, Ny Vollen's *Cornucopia* and the Nulls' *Aay'han*, were parked beneath the still-closed roof, their landing ramps down. Laseema was being hauled into *Cornucopia*, Ordo into *Aay'han.*

In the opposite corner, the hangar's third occupant, a sleek Aggressor-class starfighter, was pushing off the ground with its repulsorlifts and sending gusts of hot wind through the confined space.

Scout tried to remember the old instructions, the rules laid out by Master Maruk and Iron Hand in another life: angle your back to the closest wall, keep your saber up, watch

everything, hear everything, *feel* everything through the Force.

Right now the only thing Scout *felt* was scared out of her mind.

She tried to stand facing the opening, positioning herself between the enemy and ramp to *Aay'han*. Laser blasts whipped her direction and she brought up her lightsaber to deflect them. She batted back one, two, three. Zey stood further ahead and spun his saber with elegant ease, batting bolt after bolt into the threshold. One clone trooper's armor sparked and flashed and he fell back, killed by his own shot.

Then someone shouted, “Watch out!”

Scout spun to her right. Call it luck, the Force, instinct; she knew danger was racing toward her. Two Mandalorians in gray Death Watch armor charged out from behind a pile of storage crates where they must have been hiding. Scout froze where she was; her feet wouldn't move. The Mandos began shooting; two shots buzzed by her head, singing her hair.

Then a hard body slammed into her. A'den wrapped one arm around her waist and tossed her roughly to the ground, then spun around and cracked an elbow in the neck of the Death Watch thug who'd suddenly appeared in front of him. The soldier stumbled; A'den locked his leg around the man's thigh, kicked back, and knocked him off balance. The Mandalorian tumbled to the floor in front of Scout.

A'den turned on the other Death Watch man just in time for a rifle shot to skim his *beskar*. He grunted, stumbled back, and raised his own gun to fire. The downed man had jumped up to his feet, grabbed his gun, and readied a shot at the back of A'den's neck.

Scout's hand found her lightsaber. She jumped up; her blade stretched out; she slashed. The smell of scorched flesh and melted metal filled her nose. The man in front of her seemed to freeze in mid-motion. Then the top of his body, helmet and shoulders and torso, clattered to the

ground. His legs and hips, still standing, wavered for a second before they collapsed too.

Scout stared at the man she'd killed. The lightsaber still buzzed in her hands. Laser blasts sang around her, A'den dropped his opponent with a point-blank shot through the helmet visor as the hangar's ceiling opened and the Aggressor burst out into the new day's sky.

Scout couldn't take her eyes off the body.

Then A'den grabbed her by the waist again and pulled her forward.

"Thanks for the save, kid, but watch the saber. Let's get our *shebs* out of here."

He pulled her through the firefight, onto *Aay'han*'s ramp and into its cargo hold, right on Master Zey's heels, but she barely noticed that either. As the ramp closed and *Aay'han* lurched into the air, she couldn't take her eyes off the torso and legs, grotesquely criss-crossed on top of each other, not until the ramp clanked shut and hid everything from view.

Despite everything, Kal Skirata was okay. He had to tell himself that so he kept on telling himself that. Jilka was dead. *Mij'ika* was dead. Ordo and Laseema were hurt but they were okay. They'd salvaged what Uthan needed to keep on healing clones and that was okay too. They'd have to *ba'slan shev'la* after this, scatter and disappear and regroup later, but that was okay too, everything was okay, he could handle it, he could handle it.

He sat next to Ny in *Cornucopia*'s cockpit. The freighter was unarmed- an oversight they'd planned on fixing but never got around to- which was why they let Vau, Kom'rk, and Prudii take the Aggressor out first. The Imps, or Death Watch, or whoever was attacking them didn't seem to have brought plentiful air support, so hopefully the Aggressor would be enough to clear the battle-zone and secure safe passage out of the system.

From the comm station behind Skirata, his daughter reported, "*Aay'han* says they're ready to do."

"They have everyone?"

"Mereel says so."

"Get me a line to Vau," Skirata said. He was no pilot, or co-pilot, and he hadn't spent as much time in Ny's ship as he should have, but when the green light started blinking he knew that Ruu had patched the communications link to his console.

He flipped the switch and leaned close to the audio grille. "Walon, you hear me? *Walon*?"

"We're here, *buir*," Kom'rk replied. "You got 'em all?"

"We got everyone." Everyone still breathing, anyway. "It's getting hairy in here. Is it clear outside?"

"Affirmative. Sensors show a flight of snubfighters coming fast, plus a shuttle. Time to punch it."

"On our way." Skirata looked to Ny. "You ready?"

Any other *arueti* woman would have been breaking down with fear in this situation but Ny, bless her, just nodded, eyes dead ahead on the Death Watch and Imp thugs pouring through the gap in the wall. She gripped *Cornucopia*'s throttle tight enough to pale her knuckles.

"Ruu, tell *Mer'ika* to punch out! Now!"

Ny kicked in the repulsorlifts to high power. *Cornucopia* shot straight up through the open ceiling and into a rosy sky. *Aay'han* rose with her while the Aggressor spun circles around the clearing. Scattered rifle-blasts darted up through the sky, mostly missing the three spacecraft or otherwise twanging pathetically against their hulls.

Cornucopia pointed her nose upward and shot ahead on top atmospheric speed. The battle-scarred clearing, the *karyai* hut, the lake that Skirata and his *aliit* had called home for almost a year disappeared in the blink of an eye, and would not come again.

"Sensors show Imp fighters approaching," Ruu reported.

"Time to intercept?"

"Shows... two minutes, *buir*."

"We'll be out of the grav well by then," Ny said. Her voice was still incredibly steady.

"You have the coordinates?" Each ship had a different location programmed for their initial jump; they'd reunite at another pre-set location later.

"Ready to go," Ny said.

"What about the others? Will they make it too?"

"They'll be okay, *buir*."

Fire danced across the viewport as they cleared the atmosphere. The red tints of new daylight disappeared and their cockpit filled with the constant nothingness of space.

"Those fighters are slowing as they break atmo," Ruu said. "We'll make it, *buir*."

Skirata didn't release his breath, not until Ny kicked her freighter into hyperspace. Distant stars became streams of pure white and then their entire viewport blazed with the dazling light of hyperspace.

Finally, Skirata breathed out. Ny did too. She took her hands off the controls and folded them in her lap to hide the shaking.

In the back of the cabin, *Kad'ika* started crying in Besany's arms. Incredibly, it was the first noise he'd made since the attack began. Skirata sunk into the co-pilot's seat, listened, and let everything they'd lost finally sink in.

It was not going to be *okay* anymore.

Ny reached out and laid the back of her fingers against the rough stubble of his cheek.

"Cheer up, Shorty," she smiled weakly. "You're still breathing. You've still got your sons."

He reached up and let his fingers touch hers. They interlocked, and their hands lowered but did not separate. Neither of them said a word. They looked away from each other, stared at the blur of hyperspace, and didn't let go.

Behind them, *Kad'ika* continued to wail.

By the time Darman's blastboat reached Kyrimorut, it was all over. The flight of V-wing fighters sent to escort

them had veered off in the upper atmosphere, on the trail of three ships that had escaped from the compounds hangar. As the V-wings' engines had flared ahead, Darman had been ready to fire on them from behind until Rede reported, so crisp and polite, that the V-wings wouldn't catch up with them in time.

A wave of relief flooded through Darman, but dread came back in full when they landed in the battle-scarred clearing. Fresh morning light had just crested the surrounding tree-tops and spilled harsh gold illumination onto everything: the tall grass, the ruined buildings, the pillars of black smoke still rising into the sky.

Once, Darman had thought of this place as the home he'd never seen, and the reward that waited for him when all his trials were done, but that had been a long time ago, when Etain had also been part of his hopes instead of the source of his regret.

They landed the blastboat in the grass and filed out: Niner first, then Darman, and Rede in the back. There were other men standing in the field, surveying the wreckage. Most were clones but a few were Mandalorians in dark gray armor.

Death Watch. It had to be.

One of the clones with lieutenant's markings hailed the new arrivals. He walked up to Niner and said, "Welcome. You were our intel point men?"

It took Niner a moment to respond; he'd covered his face in his helmet ever since their attempts to comm Kyrimorut and warn them were blocked by a planetside jamming field. He'd barely said a word since and Darman could only imagine how shocked and angry his brother must be.

"That's right," Niner said at last. "What's the status?"

The lieutenant looked around the battlefield. "Unfortunately, most of them escaped. The local militia formed the first wave of the assault and took heavy casualties."

Good, Darman thought, the more Death Watch *shabuire* killed the better, but he knew that wasn't the end of it.

"What losses did the enemy take?" Niner asked.

"We've found two bodies so far. A man and a woman."

"Were they Jedi?" Darman spoke up.

The lieutenant didn't answer right away; he was probably a good clone, a good soldier. taken aback but Darman's lack of protocol. But he said, "We haven't found a lightsaber on either of them."

"Can we see the bodies?" Niner's voice was steady.

"Of course. Right this way."

The lieutenant led them through the hip-tall grass. Darman adjusted his helmet visor to filter out the glare of the sunlight in the east. It made the world seemed cold and dim.

The lieutenant walked up to another clone standing in the grass. The clone stepped aside, revealing the body he'd been keeping watch over. It was a woman, human with long dark hair. It was nobody Darman had seen before and he felt weak with relief.

He made sure his comlink was patched in securely to Niner's helmet and said, "Who do you think she is?"

"Not sure." Niner crouched low over the body but didn't touch it. "Could be *Kal'buir*'s daughter?"

"Ruusaan?" Darman had forgotten all about her. He leaned over the body too. He knew *Kal'buir*'s biological daughter was supposed to be nearing middle age, and this woman looked younger than that.

"I don't think it's her," he told Niner. "One of *Kal'buir*'s other strays, probably."

Niner didn't respond. Darman hoped, believed it was true. He *needed* it to be true. From the moment Rede popped off his call to the local garrison, his mind had been trapped in a strange limbo, unsure who, if anyone, could be blamed for the catastrophe.

Now it seemed the catastrophe wasn't as bad as he'd feared during the long flight down to Kyrimorut, and the specter of a guilty conscience started to lift.

"We found one more over there," the lieutenant gestured to the smoking wreckage of what must have been a small shed. "That one's male. Looks like a Mandalorian."

Darman fell back into limbo again. As he, Niner, and Rede walked through the grass, he moved one foot ahead of the other like an automaton. His mind was empty, waiting for relief or guilt to overwhelm it in the coming seconds.

"This body was badly damaged in an explosion, along with several members of the local militia," the lieutenant was saying. "It may take longer to identify."

A whole set of corpses had been pulled from the debris and laid out in the grass. All of them were burned black from the explosion and several were mangled or missing limbs. Most wore the darker armor of the Death Watch, but one stood out from all the others.

The torso was scorched black and blasted inward in a way that must have crushed the chest inside. Even *beskar'gam* could twist and deform if exposed to the sudden blast of heat from a grenade at close range. Someone had found the decency to lay a white cloth over the wreckage of the face. The arms and legs, however, were still intact, and their armor was gold.

Darman's knees went weak. He forgot Niner and Rede and the lieutenant and pitched forward into the grass. His clenched knuckled dug into the soil and he screamed within the bitter privacy of his own helmet.

Almost as fast as he fell, Niner was beside him. Niner shook his shoulders and shouted over their secure comlink, "*Udesii,* Dar! *Udesii*! It's not him! It's not *Kal'buir*!"

Darman panted hard; his throat scraped when he said, "That armor? It has to be him!"

"Take a closer look, Dar! It's not his armor! Look at it!"

It took incredible effort to lift his head and open his eyes. Darman looked at those arm and leg plates, really looked at them. He pulled one hand out of the soil and turned his helmet visor to unfiltered visual. Even in the strange light

of dawn he could see that the armor's gold tone had a slightly darker tint than *Kal'buir*'s. The structure of the plating was different too; the leg and arm plating had slightly rounded edges, whereas his father's were all right angles. He realized this man was taller than *Kal'buir* as well.

Above him, Niner was on his feet, explaining to the lieutenant, "I'm sorry. We lost a brother a few weeks ago, head wound. Self-inflicted, actually. My friend, well…"

The nameless lieutenant nodded in understanding. Niner helped pull Darman up and switched his comlink back to private mode.

"It's not *Kal'buir*, Dar, do you see that now? He got away. Everyone we care about got away. It's okay."

"Where? Where did they-"

"Jaing and Mereel will let us know. We'll figure out something else, Dar."

"Not now. We can't get away. Rede's on our backs now, and Melusar-"

He couldn't finish his sentence. All this time he'd thought Captain Melusar, 'Holy Roly,' was as pure as could be, devoted to the wellbeing of his clone troops and the destruction of the Jedi. He had used Rede and he'd lied to Darman. Yes, Darman had lied to him too, but that didn't make it any better.

The Empire, the Jedi, Rede, Melusar, maybe even Niner and Skirata, they were all against him now. He was all alone.

"We'll figure something out, Dar, I promise," Niner said, and with the smoothness of a true sergeant, he turned back to the lieutenant and asked for a full briefing of the battle.

Darman listened to them talk but didn't hear a word. He stared down at the bodies, gray armor and gold, and tried to find his way out of limbo.

Maybe Niner was right. There might still be a way to save his son. He might even be able to save his father and brothers, if he played his sabacc cards right.

Melusar didn't have proof that he'd planned to desert. He must have suspected something, to have pulled Rede aside like that, but he didn't *know*, and neither Niner nor Darman had given him any proof of disloyalty on this mission.

He'd told Melusar he'd give the man Jedi, and he hadn't been lying about that. Those Jedi were still with his family, manipulating them and scheming to steal his son, but if he could find some way to separate them, to give Melusar his Jedi while he escaped with Kad and *Kal'buir* and his brothers, well, that would be the happiest ending of all.

He didn't know how he'd do it yet, but he could find a way. He had to. He couldn't have come so far, fought so hard, lost so much, for nothing.

Interlude: Through the Distance

The man lowered his head and was silent. The boy, still seated on the log, stared up at him, expectant, but the man did not speak. Around them, the daylight was getting sharper and the shadows longer. A few birds wheeled in the open sky overhead, cawing.

"So that happened here?" the boy said finally. "I mean, this *is* Kyrimorut, isn't it?"

"The original compound was maybe ten, twenty kilometers south of here. On the plain, not in the mountains. *Kal'buir* wanted to call our new place Kyrimorut, after the old one."

"The old one got found out. It got destroyed."

"But it was our home."

The boy looked at the boots on his feet. "I never knew what happened to the old Kyrimorut. Nobody told me." All he remembered was spaceships, and ports, and hiding in different places until they came here two summers ago.

"Do you like it here?"

"I like the mountains. I like the trees and the animals and the air. You don't get wind on spaceships. First I thought it was weird. But I like it now. I just wonder if we're safe."

"*Kal'buir* thinks we are. I think he's right. The Empire's already got Mandalore under heel. They're off putting

down other worlds, and they've made bigger enemies than us."

"Are you sure?"

"A *chakaar* like Palpatine excels at making enemies. We're not like him. After we left Mandalore the first time we went full *ba'slan shev'la*."

"Strategic disappearance," the boy translated is if by route.

"*Kal'buir*'s made sure the Empire thinks we're dead. We're safe here. We can wait."

"Wait for what?"

"Wait until Palpatine bites off more than he can chew. Wait until the Empire's dying."

"And then we free Mandalore?"

The man smirked. "Exactly."

The boy looked at his boots. "That story's not over yet, is it? You haven't told me what happened to my father."

The smile quickly disappeared. "No. I haven't."

"I want to know. Now. Please."

The man looked around at the lengthening shadows. "It's getting late. We have a long walk back to camp."

"You have night vision on your *buy'c*, don't you?"

The man looked down at his T-visor helmet, now resting between his boots. "I suppose I do. Still, I wouldn't want people to worry."

"I'm worried now. You can't just start a story like that and not end it."

"All right," the man gave a short sigh. "I'll tell you what happened next. But it's not going to be a happy story."

"I know that. But I have to find out."

The man stared at the boy without speaking. The boy felt like he was being probed and said, "Are you going to do it or not?"

"You're very brave, *Kad'ika*."

"Tell me, please."

"All right, I will. But first, you have to understand that what happened to your father, what happened to me and all

your uncles, was part of something much, much bigger. We all like to think we can control our own destinies, but sometimes we get pulled into other peoples' stories. Sometimes we let ourselves be pulled along, willingly."

The boy could sense an immense sadness coming from the man, like he was unearthing one of his long-buried regrets.

"For what happened next, *Kad'ika*, I want you to know I'm sorry. I did what I thought was right at the time. If I knew then what I know now...." He shook his head. "No. I won't go there. That's foundation. I can't unring that bell."

"But *Bard'ika*, what *happened*?" The boy's voice cracked.

"I made a choice. And I got a lot of people killed. *Kad'ika*, I got your father killed."

The boy stayed there, deathly still, watching, waiting.

"This is my part of the story," said the man. "My choice, and its consequences..."

Part II: Belsavis
The Passing Light of Day

8

"It's easy to hate. It's easy to blame others for your problems. I fall into that trap too easily myself. But in the end, you can find heroes and villains on any side of a conflict. There are men in the Empire who truly believe they're making the galaxy a safer place for everyone. There are Jedi who protect weak and love selflessly, with all their hearts. And, well, your brothers would be the first to tell you that there are some true chakaare *wearing Mando armor."*

She'd never laid eyes on it before, but the sight of Belsavis filled Callista Masana with a strange nostalgia. The world in front of her had very little in common with her homeworld. Chad had been covered in salty blue oceans while Belsavis was white with snow; humans on her world had lived in scattered sunny islands, while here they lived instead in scattered valleys and canyons carved by the movement of tectonic plates and warmed by the heat of the ice world's active core.

Perhaps that was the key to it; another world unfriendly to large-scale habitation, where sentients had to eke out life wherever they could and would never be able to subject it to wholesale technological conquest and bury every inch of it under duracrete and steel like Coruscant, Metellos, or Nar Shadaa. It was a world where a being had no choice but to subject herself to nature, surrender her ego, and learn to live by its own rules. In learning the will of nature, a being learned the will of the Force as well; at least, that was what Master Altis had taught her.

So in one sense, at least, Belsavis and Chad were very much alike.

"Hey, Callie," a hand fell on her shoulder and shook her lightly from her reverie, "Are you ready to transmit the code?"

She looked up at Geith Eris, took in his familiar face: broad cheekbones, dark eyes, pale skin, all framed by a rust-red beard. Through the Force she could feel his earnest concern for her as well. He'd sensed that something had disturbed her, and Geith, being Geith, wanted to fix a problem whenever he saw it. It was something that could be very aggravating about him, especially since she couldn't hide her emotions from a fellow Jedi, but it was also why she loved him. He never stopped caring.

"I'm all right," she assured him and turned her attention to the communications console. "Let's see if anyone's listening."

"I hope so." Geith sat down in the copilot's seat beside her and leaned forward anxiously to stare at the white sphere ahead of them.

"They'll be there," Callista did her best to project confidence through the Force.

"You heard what Skirata told Djinn. I also just checked the HoloNet. Imps are saying they've just destroyed a secret Jedi outpost at Arkinnea."

Callista felt her throat go dry. "Could just be propaganda. That's all the 'Net is nowadays. I've never heard of Arkinnea, have you?"

"No, but I never heard of Belsavis until a few days ago."

"Have a little faith," she muttered and punched the encryption code into the communications array.

Geith went silent, but she could still feel his anxiety. For years he'd complained about the Jedi Order, about its strictures and rules, about the way it attached itself to the Republic's hip and made itself into a tool of a corrupt state. Then the Republic had become an Empire and the Jedi a hunted people, and suddenly Geith had found fraternity

with a group he'd previously despised. Every day he scoured the HoloNet and whatever encrypted systems Master Altis had the codes for, trying to scrounge up some information about any surviving Jedi.

It was ironic that it had been someone from Belsavis who'd contacted them. Callista just hoped she was still around.

She fired up the communications array, set it to the assigned frequency, and said, "This is *Wookiee Gunner* requesting entry. Repeat, this is *Wookiee Gunner*. Please respond."

She waited. Geith's right leg twitched anxiously up and down.

Then a voice, female, marred by static, said: "How was your flight, *Wookiee Gunner*?"

She thought she recognized the voice, but she had to be sure. "Not bad. We just came from high tea with the Senex Lords."

There was a slight pause. Then the voice said, "Did they give you sugar?"

"Nope, just honey." Callista smiled as she completed the code-phrase.

She could hear her relief echoed in Margolis' voice. "Is that you, Callie?"

"It's been a long time. It's good to hear from you."

"It's good to hear from anyone nowadays. I'll give you the coordinates now."

"Thanks. We'll see you soon," Callista said, and killed the comlink. She looked at her nav computer and saw ground control's location pop up. She set the course then looked at Geith, still clinging to the arms of his chair. At least his leg had stopped twitching.

"See? Nothing to worry about."

"I'm glad." His voice was brittle.

Callista fought a smirk as their freighter dove into the ice world's atmosphere. Upper-level wind currents buffeted their ship and knocked them about in their crash webbing,

but it only lasted for a minute before their inertial compensator adjusted and the flight became smooth again.

"Are we finally there?" a voice chimed from behind him.

"It's getting bumpy!" said another child.

Callista and Geith looked behind them to see two small black-haired children crowded in the cockpit entrance. Roganda and Lagan Ismaren were five and six years old, respectively, both energetic and handsome like their mother had been. Istar had died holding back a flight of Imperial pursuit vessels chasing down Master Altis's *Chu'unthor*, and the sight of her children always made Callista'a heart sink.

The siblings hid the pain of loss well. Lagan, always the more confident one, shouldered past his sister and hopped into the passenger seat behind Geith.

"Well, is this it?" he said, "Is this Belsavis?"

"That it is," Geith favored the boy with a smile; he was good with children, better than Callista.

"Is this really going to be our new home?" Roganda asked, still lingering in the doorway.

"Well, you're going to check it out and see how you like it. Then we'll decide," Geith said. "Come on, Roganda, take a seat behind Callie."

The girl nodded and hopped into the chair. Callista was grateful to turn her attention away from Istar's children and back to *Wookiee Gunner*'s controls.

The world rising up to meet them was a massive sprawl of ice. A few low ridges trailed blue shadows but for the most part the world seemed as blank as a painter's unused canvas. Callista was reminded of Chad again; it had felt soothing to fly over so much featureless ocean, and it felt much the same as the endless snowfields rolled beneath them.

"There," Geith called, stabbing a finger at the horizon.

"I see it!" cried Lagan.

Callista saw it too. There was a ridge of mountains higher than the others they'd seen. A few white peaks

stabbed upward into drifts of low clouds. Callista pulled the freighter up slightly so they skimmed over the tops of the ridges. Once they climbed the white walls everything changed. Snow melted away to reveal steep cliffs and broad slopes of bare rock, smooth and black and volcanic. Obsidian chasms fell toward the planet's distant core, creating vents for thermal energy to rise and in turn for life to survive in scattered islands.

When they dropped into the valley everything changed. Winds buffeted their shuttle and Roganda let out a yelp as an air gust nearly wrenched them into the side of a canyon before Callista got control back. The outside temperature shot up and they were suddenly surrounded by life: trees shot up from rich soil and spread out fat palm fronds. Vines and creepers formed green webs over black stone while beautiful flowers added punctuations of red and gold.

Their sensors spotted artificial structures within one of the valleys, protected from storms by a broad transparisteel dome. One squat tower, some four storeys high, rose from a walled compound, and just beyond the edge of the dome was a small landing pad just big enough for a single shuttle or freighter. As she maneuvered *Wookiee Gunner* onto the platform, Callista felt a spike of surprising disappointment. This settlement looked positively tiny, and certainly couldn't fit what they needed. At the same time, she knew its small size was probably what had kept it safe from the Empire's prying eyes.

One look at the sensors told them they wouldn't need jackets outside. Callista and Geith took a moment to gather their bags while Roganda and Ismaren trotted down to the cargo hold. When everyone was ready, they lowered the landing ramp, and walked out onto the platform.

The atmosphere inside the valley had a strange quality; it was warm and windy but also humid. It smelled like jungles Callista had visited in the past, full of decay and growing things all mixed together, but beneath that was a whiff of brimstone from deep within the planet. High

above the dome, drier cooler air howled through crevasses and around eroded peaks of jagged rock, creating a harrowing background scream behind the hiss of *Gunner*'s cooling engines. The collision of cold air from above and cool from below had to create plentiful thunderstorms: good for the enclosed jungle biome but bad for beings trying to land ships inside. *Wookiee Gunner* had lucky timing.

Callista took her attention off the air and focused on the woman in front of her. Margolis Ming was as tall, blonde, and lovely as she remembered, and she wrapped the other woman in a firm hug before Margolis stepped back an exchanged a more formal handshake with Geith.

"It's good to see both of you again," Margolis smiled. "I'm so glad you're still all right."

"We could say the same." Geith put his hands on his hips. "You remember Lagan and Roganda, don't you?"

Margolis's eyes went wide when she saw the children. "Oh, goodness! I barely recognized you, you've grown so much."

Lagan puffed his chest out and looked proud, but Roganda frowned. "Did you use to be on Master Altis's ship?"

"That's right. I knew your mother," Margolis smiled a little sadly.

"You've been here, what, three years?" Geith asked.

"It's been almost four, actually." She didn't have to say it was right after the war started. Margolis, unsure of her Force abilities but definitely not a soldier, had left *Chu'unthor* for a more peaceful life, and Callista didn't begrudge her that.

"Master Altis is all right," Geith told her; she already knew about Istar. "So's Ash."

"I'm glad. I hope I get to see them soon." Margolis gestured to the high durasteel gate behind her. "Come in. I'm sure Master Plett would like to meet you."

The gate swung open without Margolis having to ask. As Callista and Geith followed her into the compound, they were greeted by a garden of lush plants, green and blue and red, some local and others transplanted from different planets from across the galaxy and made to grow in the black volcanic soil of Belsavis's rift valleys.

A pair of beings stood behind the gate's hinged doors, their hands on the huge metal handles they'd used the drag them over. Each was a head taller than even Geith. They had gray-blue skin and long dangling arms.

"There are Kos and Jebu," Margolis gave them little bows, which they returned. "The Mluki are the native sentients of this planet. They've helped Master Plett in his research for decades."

"I'm surprised a planet with this kind of ecosystem evolved intelligent life," Geith said.

"The planet wasn't always this cold. We believe they evolved on the plains first, then took shelter in the rift valleys when temperatures started to plunge. There's been remarkable divergent evolution between populations in different valleys, much like the plants and fungi that grow here. From a biological perspective the whole thing is fascinating. But come, you can ask Master Plett about all that. He's the expert."

As they walked to the base of the tower, Callista noticed something scampering between a patch of palm fronds and a shock of red-petalled flowers as tall as she was. She stopped and looked closer to see a small human boy peeking shyly out from between thick stalks.

A tall female Ho'din suddenly appeared behind the boy. He looked like he was going to jump and run but she planted green four-fingered hands on his shoulders; he squirmed awkwardly in her grip.

"That's Nichos," Margolis smiled and waved at the boy. "And this is Ustu, one of the other caretakers."

"It is a pleasure to meet you," the Ho'din bowed her long neck. "I see you've brought us some more guests."

"These are Roganda and Lagan," Geith looked at the children. "Would you two like to say hello to Nichos?"

Lagan gave a friendly wave; Roganda seemed to blush a little.

"I can show the children around if you'd like," Ustu said.

"We'd appreciate that," said Callista. "We have to have a talk with Master Plett. Lagan, Roganda, how about you spent some time with Ustu and Nichos?"

"There are plenty of other children here for you to meet," Ustu said.

Roganda glanced at Lagan, like she was waiting for direction. Her brother gave a nod and led her over to Nichos and Ustu. The other boy looked at the newcomers warily but didn't try to run again.

"We'll trust them to your care," said Geith.

"Don't worry, Ustu is wonderful with children," Margolis said. "Lagan, Roganda, make some new friends, okay?"

Lagan nodded bravely as Margolis led Geith and Callista away, down another leafy garden path.

"Is he from the Temple on Coruscant?" Callista asked.

Margolis nodded. "There was a shipfull of younglings off-planet during... the attack. Master Plett brought them here. We already had a few other orphans he'd picked up, non-Force-sensitives."

"How many younglings from the Temple?" Geith asked. A year ago he'd spoken of those children, taken from their families as babies and raised among strangers, with pity and a touch of scorn, but now he just sounded curious.

"We have fifteen," Margolis said. She clearly had a question for them but left it unasked. Instead she led them into the base of the tower.

The building was simple, almost primitive. It was built from wood and stone, and the door swung open on simple hinges. Inside there were no fancy holo-emitters or computers. Potted plants hung from the ceiling and basked in the blue-white light of glow-globes tuned to mimic the sunlight of foreign worlds. Standing amidst his plants was

a reedy green-skinned Ho'din, probably two heads taller than even Geith. The stalks on his head had gone white and he looked down at them with large black eyes and a patient smile on his lipless mouth.

"Welcome to Belsavis," the Ho'din said. "I am Master So Plett."

"It is an honor, Master," Geith gave a bow, and Callista followed his lead. "My name is Geith Eris, and this is Callista Masana. We are apprenticed to Master Altis."

The old Jedi waved one green hand. "There's no need for formalities. I know Djinn didn't teach them to you. It is simply good to see new faces. We do not have many of those here."

"We understood that's how you like it, Master Plett," Geith straightened.

He bobbed his head in a nod. "I have been here for almost seventy years. Studying, experimenting. Tending to my garden." His mouth flexed into a smile again. "I did not wish to be drawn into the drama of the galaxy outside, but in times like these a being has to do anything he can to help those in need. And there as so many poor beings in need right now, so I try to do what I can."

He reminded Callista of Master Altis already. She said, "I understand you're already sheltering a number of younglings from the Jedi Temple."

"Young Margolis has been very good with them, better than an old man like me," the Ho'din gestured to the human woman, who almost blushed at the compliment.

"It was very brave of you, Master Plett," Geith said. "You took a lot of risk, bringing Jedi here when the Empire is hunting for them."

"I am a Jedi as well, as are you. The Empire hunts for us all. Thankfully, it is a large galaxy, and there are many places to hide."

"It's also a big Empire, and they've found hiding places already," Geith said gravely. "That's why Master Altis keeps us moving."

"Ah, yes, that ship of his. He calls it *Chu'unthor*, doesn't he, after the ancient academy vessel?"

"That's right," Callista said. "Do you know him well?"

"Djinn was the one who recommended I seek out Master Plett," Margolis said. "He said it would help me find a quieter, simpler life."

"I did what I could, while I could," Plett said.

The Ho'din's flat green face lacked the expressiveness of a human's, but Callista could feel his regret and humility in the Force. It seemed to be something universal among Force-users nowadays.

Plett jerked abruptly, like he was shaking off a gloomy burden, and said, "What manner of help does Djinn need right now?"

Geith cleared his throat; this was what they'd come for. "As you probably know, Jedi who follow Master Altis live differently than those in the Temple. We train later, marry, and have families." He paused, like he was waiting for a censure, but got none. "We have about a dozen children in our party. Some are children of the Jedi, some not."

"Yes, I could feel two of them with you when you arrived."

"We didn't mean to intrude, Master Plett, but we wanted the children to explore your settlement themselves and decide if this would be good for them."

"And you would like to add more to my orphanage?"

"They're not orphans, not all of them," Callista said. "But it's very dangerous right now. The Empire hasn't found us yet but we've had some close calls, and we've lost good people already. Master Altis feels that it would be better if we hide the children somewhere safe."

Plett nodded. "Tell me, are any of these children yours?"

Callista and Geith looked at each other in shock. The old Ho'din chuckled, "Just because I've lived alone for so long does not mean I can't read people. Especially other Jedi."

"We don't have any children," Geith said simply. They had talked about it, very tentatively, during the short weeks

when it seemed like the war was burning itself out in the Outer Rim and hope made a brief return to their lives.

"I understand everything," Plett said, and Callista didn't doubt that. "I must give Djinn credit. He's made an offer no being of good conscience can refuse."

"Then you'll shelter the children?"

"And any others who wish to come here."

Geith looked uncharacteristically uncomfortable. "Master Plett, we also came to warn you. Some of Master Altis's sources indicate that the Empire is looking for you, specifically."

"And how is that?" the Ho'din's flat face betrayed no anxiety, but Callista couldn't read anything in the Force either.

"We've been told the Empire is looking for a place called 'Plett's Well.' We assumed it had something to do with you."

Plett didn't say anything. Margolis asked, "Where did you hear about that?"

"We have many contacts," Callista said simply. How those contacts, a gruff Mandalorian training sergeant and his family of clone deserters, learned of it, she didn't know and didn't want to.

"Master Plett, this isn't good," Margolis frowned.

But the Ho'din shook his head. "They must have heard something about the younglings we've already sheltered. But they do not know our location, do they?"

"We don't think so, Master," Callista said, "But they're clearly looking. If you'd like, we can transport you and the children to a new location entirely, somewhere better defended."

Geith said, "If you want to relocate to *Chu'unthor* until we find you a better hiding place, that is an option."

Plett shook his head again. "That has always been a fear of danger for us, but I am old. I don't fear death as I used to."

"You have many young beings in your care," Callista pointed out. "Don't you fear for them?"

"Of course I do. Believe me, we take proper precautions. There is much more to this place than there seems at first glance."

"We're not helpless," Margolis added. "We have several Y-wings and a blastboat in cave hangars, and this location is very hard to find and very easy to defend."

"Y-wings?" Callista had to admit she was impressed. "They must be well hidden."

"I was wondering about that," Geith said. "You said you have about twenty people here already, and now you're willing to take at least a dozen more. There doesn't seem enough *room* for them all."

Plett chuckled and, to their surprise, Margolis did too. The woman smiled and said, "This isn't our home, Geith. This is the *doorway*."

Callista frowned. "We don't understand."

Plett walked over to the farthest wall and pressed a green hand against the brick. A section of the wall, as large as a doorframe but camouflaged against black rock, slid back to reveal a stairwell curving downward into a black-bottomed shaft.

"Margolis, would you like you give your friends a tour?" the Ho'din asked.

"Gladly." The blonde woman picked up a glow-lamp and switched it on. "Come on. I can show you everything. We call it Plett's Well."

9

"Sometimes after a battle, you need to catch your breath and regroup. Of course, the other hutuune *you just fought is doing the same thing, and he doesn't want to get caught napping by you any more than you want to get caught napping by him. So rest is never long, not for people like us. Not for soldiers."*

Gilad Pellaeon's throat tightened as his shuttle slipped out of *Valediction*'s belly and cut across the open space. The broad brown curve of the planet Farstine glowed in sunlight beneath him. In front of him loomed the former Separatist orbital defense platform that Vice Admiral Grant had converted to a sector command station after capturing the planet.

Pellaeon wished Mynar Vernedet could be at his side, but he hasn't that lucky. Grant had requested to meet with Pellaeon personally and alone, and that meant he was probably in for a severe dressing down, if not a demotion. He recognized he deserved it; he'd been tasked with bringing the Bavinyari hold-outs into line and he'd failed repeatedly, allowing them to attack Farstine directly. In a way he wished he *would* be demoted, even drummed out of the Navy entirely. At least then he wouldn't have to deal with this interminable war. He might even be able to find Hallena again, if she was still alive.

The space over Farstine looked empty now. It had taken him less than ten minutes to get from *Valediction*'s bridge to her hangar bay, but somewhere in that time the asteroid, or whatever it was, had jumped to hyperspace. Where it

had gone, what its purpose was, how it operated, all of it was a mystery.

The answers, or at least some of them, were probably waiting for him on Grant's command station. That should have made him feel better, but it didn't in the least.

When his shuttle arrived, a half-dozen troopers in polished white armor escorted him down hallways that, just a few months ago, had been full of equally shiny droid soldiers. There was no outward sign of it; the station carried on in crisp mechanic precision no matter who ran it, and Pellaeon wasn't sure if he liked that or not.

The troopers stopped at the entrance to Grant's office and bade Pellaeon enter alone. The captain took a moment to make sure his gray uniform was entirely straight, then stepped through the doorway.

Grant was sitting behind a desk hand-made from a dark and polished wood. The elegant carving on its legs and edges was in stark contrast to the utilitarian planes and right angles that made up the rest of the office, but Pellaeon wasn't surprised to see it. It was probably one of the many aristocratic affectations Grant had brought with him from the Tapani Sector.

"Please, sit down," Grant waved a fine-fingered hand at the chair in front of his desk. It, too, was hand-carved from fine dark wood, and Pellaeon sank down on its soft cushions.

He hated the damn chair. It was trying to make him feel comfortable and comfortable was the last thing he needed to be right now.

"Captain, I want to thank you for your quick response in coming to Farstine's aid," Grant began.

That took Pellaeon by surprise. He felt a surge of elation that he was not about to be drummed out, followed by a surge of foreboding.

"As you are no doubt aware, a new battle station has arrived in our sector," Grant continued. "It is a brand-new, top-secret battlemoon called the *Eye of Palpatine*. It was

developed by some of the Emperor's finest research scientists, Demetrius Zaarin and Ohran Zeldor." The first name was vaguely familiar to Pellaeon, the second not at all. "It is a revolutionary piece of technology, constructed through the interior of an asteroid and managed almost entirely by artificial intelligence. It has been programmed to pick up squadron of sleeper clone commandos scattered across this region of space. The Emperor, in his wisdom, has chosen to make our oversector its proving ground."

Grant paused, as though there was something he expected Pellaeon to say. The captain asked, "What can I do to assist in its mission, Admiral?"

Grant smiled slightly, like his dog had just rolled over on request. "You are a very capable officer, Captain, which is why I want you to take both *Valediction* and *Salvation* and serve as the *Eye of Palpatine's* escort and protector, should it need one."

"Where will it be sent, sir?"

His gut told him a punitive mission to Bavinyar was on the table. It would be very ugly, but it might be the only way to force Syne to surrender.

"Right now, we have relocated the battlemoon to the Moonflower Nebula. It's an ideal place to hide the *Eye* until it is ready to be used."

Pellaeon fought a frown. The Moonflower Nebula was a navigation hazard infamous for its ability to muck up sensor arrays with its variety of radioactive gases. What's more, it was full of space rock, and therefore perfect camoflague for the *Eye*. While it made sense to hide an unmanned battle station there, the nebula was also close to the border with the prickly old Senex and Juvex aristocracies, which had welcomed the New Order only as long as it left their wealth and local power intact.

"Has the, ah, battlemoon's target been decided yet, Admiral?"

"We are still performing reconnaissance." Grant leaned forward slightly and lowered his voice, as though someone

else could hear the secret he was about to utter. “Captain Pellaeon, we have learned of a Jedi fortress hidden somewhere in this sector, near the border with Senex and Juvex.”

Oh, Mynar was going to love that. “We'll be fighting Jedi then, sir?”

“If all goes to plan, *Eye of Palpatine* will bombard their base into oblivion and you'll just have to sit back and watch. But of course with Jedi, things are never predictable. Did you fight with any of them during the war, Captain?”

“Briefly, sir, though they were, ah, rogue Jedi.” Grant raised a questioning eyebrow. “Jedi unattached to the Temple on Coruscant, but still fighting for the Republic. To be honest, Admiral, I never fully understood the situation.”

The one thing he did know was that Hallena had run off with Altis' people. He knew Altis kept moving on some large spaceship, and that meant whatever Jedi *Eye* was going after, Hallena wouldn't be among them.

So he hoped, anyway.

“The Jedi were never easy to understand,” Grant was saying. “Frankly, putting a caste of warrior-priests in charge of the Grand Army was a mistake, but at least that's been rectified. You won't have any qualms about leading an attack on a group of Jedi, will you, Captain? I know some officers have sympathy because of experience in the war.”

Grant talked of sympathy with condescencion and Pellaeon felt a spike of indignation. The admiral was a smart strategist but he was a desk-jockey. He'd never know about bonds formed in wartime because he never waded into the muck with his men and got his pretty hands dirty.

Pellaeon didn't let it show on his face. He said, “I have no problem, Admiral. As I said, the ones I served with weren't even Jedi in the proper sense.”

He left unsaid that they were probably Jedi enough for Palpatine to want exterminated, if it hadn't been done already.

Grant examined his face for signs of deception or doubt; apparently he found none. The admiral leaned back in his chair. “I am very glad to hear it. You'll have a full mission briefing with myself and Commodore Zaarin in two hours. You may enjoy food or rest in the officer's lounge in the meantime. My troops will take you there.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He didn't stand right away. Grant asked, “Do you have any questions, Captain?”

“I'm grateful for the assignment, Admiral.” He cupped his hands around his thighs and kept his back straight. “Sir, may I ask who will keep up the hunt for Jereveth Syne and her, ah, new friend?”

“That is being determined right now.”

It was a non-answer. It meant he didn't know, and that this *Eye of Palpatine* and its Jedi hunt had suddenly taken precedence over a months-long campaign to end this miserable lingering corner of the Clone Wars. Grant was a proud and ambitious man, and he wanted Syne defeated more than anyone; he couldn't have been pleased to have this new mission shoved into his lap.

Pellaeon asked, “Have we identified the second fleet that arrived to help Syne?”

“They are called the Sons and Daughters of Liberty,” Grant pronounced the name bitterly. “Their commander is a privateer, scoundrel, and Republic patriot named Zozridor Slayke. He helped defeat the Separatists, but unfortunately he has now joined arms with them.”

Pellaeon knew the name. The man was an ex-Judicial who’d led a pro-Republic militia. He was supposedly reckless, a general pain-in-the-butt to work with, but the ones who had said he was one hell of a fighter, and many had admitted to having a soft spot for him. His teaming up with Syne would make the pacification of the sector much harder.

But of course, Grant already knew that. For once Pellaeon felt a twinge of sympathy for his commanding officer.

"Hopefully we can finish this Jedi hunt quickly, Admiral. I'd like to finish our business with Syne, and Slayke."

"Indeed." Grant didn't smile. "Do you have any more questions, Captain?"

"Not for the moment, sir."

"Good. Dismissed."

Pellaeon rose to his feet and snapped a salute. Grant didn't move in his chair. Then Pellaeon turned and stepped out into the hallway, where a half-dozen troopers escorted him away. They were taking him to the officers' lounge to be pampered, but at the moment he just wanted to be back on *Valediction*, the closest thing he had to a home.

The adrenaline was still pumping fast through A'Sharad Hett's blood as he joined the gathering on *Iconoclast*'s main flight deck. Through the gap of the hangar mouth a miscellanea of ships drifted against distant stars. After escaping Farstine, both Syne and Slayke's fleets had engaged in a series of hyperspace jumps to throw off pursuit before finally rejoining at a pre-arranged location lightyears from any star system. Through that lonely point in space, there now drifted one sturdy old dreadnaught, a captured Separatist destroyer, and an almost comical mismatch of other vessels, ranging from a refitted Corellian picket ship to a red-painted Corellian corvette to flat wide SoroSuub fleet carrier.

Hett watched those ships drift by as he took his place next to Syne. The small woman stared straight ahead at the hangar mouth. At her other shoulder, Yvolton did the same. Two squads of footsolders, all members of the defunct Bavinyar planetary militia, stood at arms behind them.

Hett didn't see it at first, and then it appeared: one boxy shuttle, dark against dark space, visible only through the glow of its blue thruster engines.

He leaned close to Syne and said quietly, "I'm impressed you got him to come here instead of the other way around."

"It was his idea, actually," Syne said, still looking ahead. "A show of trust, I think."

Hett knew Slayke for years by reputation before finally joining him in battle over Farstine. The man had once been part of the Republic Judicial Forces, but instead of following Grant, Yullaren, Screed, and others into the GAR and thence the Imperial armed forces, Slayke had turned rogue and fought the Separatists on his own terms. After the bloody Battle of Praesitlyn, where most of his fleet had been destroyed fighting the Separatists, the Republic had more or less decided to forgive and forget the times they'd called Slayke an outlaw and a mercenary.

Hett had never imagined the man's fleet, however debilitated, would surrender to the Empire or join forces with it; the man was too notoriously idealistic for either. He'd assumed it destroyed, but apparently Slayke, known for his fiery and dramatic persona, shared one thing in common with cold and practical Syne: an absolute determination to survive.

Slayke's shuttle settled into the hangar on four extended legs. After it landed, a ramp extended from the shuttle's belly. He felt Syne tense beside him but kept his eyes straight ahead.

Two pairs of boots appeared first, followed by two sets of red leggings and brown tunics and, finally, rifles held in salute and faces half-hidden behind black visors and gold helmets. The guards stepped aside to either side of the ramp, and two more sets of boots appeared.

The people who followed were a stark contrast. The one on the right, clearly Zozridor Slayke in the flesh, was over two meters tall with a black-and-red patterned cloak thrown over broad shoulders and a barrel-like chest. His clenched hands were like white hammers at his sides and his face was half-covered by a shaggy red beard.

To his left was a woman, tall but very thin, with big white eyes like beacons against the ebony skin of her face. She wore a black jacket and trousers and a single blaster pistol

was holstered at her hip, though she walked with hands behind her back. When she glanced at Hett their eyes met very briefly; then she glanced down, saw the two lightsabers clipped to his belt, and she nearly lost her step.

Slayke either didn't notice or didn't care. He walked right up to Syne and took her hand in his own. The man was a good half-meter taller than Syne but he only looked down on her for a second; then he dipped to one knee and gave her hand a chivalrous kiss.

"Welcome to *Iconoclast.* Thank you for coming, and for your help against the Empire." Syne told Slayke, still on his knees. Her voice was even but Hett knew she was mildly amused by the theatrics.

Slayke tilted his head up. "Madam Syne, the pleasure was all mine. I am always glad to help out someone as determined to whip Palpatine's running dogs as I am."

"My goal is to free my world," Syne said, then softened her tone. "However, whipping Imperial dogs has become my speciality, and my pleasure."

Slayke boomed laughter and popped to his feet; he was fast for a big man. He gestured to his companion. "Madam Syne, I believe you have already spoken to Hallena Devis."

The dark-skinned woman bowed her head. "It's a pleasure to meet you in person."

"The pleasure is mine," Syne said. "These are two of my advisors, Andrein Yvolton and A'Sharad Hett."

"It's fantastic to meet you both," Slayke glanced at Hett and finally spotted the lightsabers. His eyes lit up and he cried, "My lords, what have we here? Did you take those from some Jedi corpses or did you acquire them by other means?"

Hett felt a spike of anger, then realized it was a valid question. Syne had fought for the Separatists during the war and against Jedi, including Hett himself. He said, "One of them is mine. The other is from my father."

"Your father was a Jedi?" Devis said. She didn't sound surprised, like most beings would. She sounded curious.

"That's right," Hett held her eyes. "I was raised by him. I became a Jedi after he died."

He sensed a hundreds questions from her, which in turn bred questions of his own, but Slayke boomed, "Come, come! Let's sit down and talk of our next move, Madam Syne!"

"*Our* next move?" Syne asked. "Are we a team from now on?"

He rubbed his red beard. "Well, that remains to be seen. However, we've already given Grant a bloody nose, and I see no reason not to land a few more punches if we can."

"Then I see our priorities are in agreement for now."

"I would hope so! By the by, Madam, I took the liberty of recording some vivid, up-close footage of the fiery death of Grant's interdictor. Would you be interested in a copy, so you might, say, send it to your allies on Bavinyar for popular consumption?"

Syne allowed a rare smile. "I think that can be arranged. Thank you for yet another gift."

Slayke laughed again. "Oh, you're welcome, Madam. Shall we have a talk, then? I think we still have a lot to discuss, especially that big battle-rock monstrosity you tangled with."

"I've prepared a place. If you'll follow me?"

Syne and Slayke took the head the column, and Hett fell in behind him. Hallena walked alongside him and he leaned in close to speak with her.

"Am I to take it that you've met Jedi before?" he asked.

"Oh, yes." She inclined her head.

"Jedi with... families?"

She nodded again.

"Did you... know them during the war?" He didn't want to hope.

She leaned in a little closer and lowered her voice. "Do you know of a Djinn Altis, Mister Hett?"

"I've heard of him." He knew Altis led some errant sect that allowed Jedi to marry and raise families. He also knew

that unlike some other unorthodox Jedi like Qui-Gon Jinn or Thracia Cho Leem, Altis had never been on good terms with Masters Yoda or Windu, which meant a clash of personalities as well as politics.

"Master Altis is alive," Hallena said. "And so are the Jedi families who follow him."

He stared at her, and tried to prod her with the Force. She felt like a normal sentient: coolly intelligent, determined, a little scared, but still normal.

He didn't think she was lying, and tried not to let hope consume him. "What are you, Miss Devis?"

"I used to be a Republic spook, believe it or not. Then I met Master Altis and I had a career change." She spoke flippantly, but he felt an undertow of guilt and private turmoil. "Since the Empire happened I've been putting my old skills to use trying to connect resistance groups. Altis was the one who hooked me up with Slayke."

"And now you've hooked Slayke up with Syne."

"Exactly," Devis nodded.

"Mister Hett, if you don't mind my saying so, you don't seem excited to hear about other Jedi surviving."

"I am, I'm just..." He didn't want to start spilling himself in the middle of the hallway to a strange woman he'd just met. He shook his head and said, "We can talk about this later. Our, ah, employers both require our full attention."

"Of course. And Mister Hett... If you want to be with other Jedi again, I'm sure Master Altis will have you."

He looked away from her, at Syne's black head bobbing alongside Slayke's broad shoulders, and realized that didn't hold any temptation to him, not at all.

It was a truism that every boss had a boss, and while that was technically accurate for every being except Palpatine himself, it did nothing to calm Octavian Grant's nerves as he stood in his private office aboard the Farstine orbital station and plugged in the proper encryption sequence for his transmission to Eriadu.

The new Empire might have been an improvement on the muddled, dysfunctional Republic, but it still had plenty of its own problems, which Palpatine seemed intent on perpetuating, not the least of which were an illogical command structure and a penchant for over-expensive and unnecessary experimental weapons. Grant would run things differently if he could, and perhaps one day he would, but he knew better than to challenge the new Emperor. He wasn't yet forty but he was already a vice admiral, with higher ranks on the horizon if he finished off Syne. Men with career prospects rarely became revolutionaries.

Palpatine had wasted no time in restructuring his new government, and that included massive changes to the command structure of its armed forces. Whereas once Grant, as a sector fleet admiral, would have reported to Coruscant, he was now placed under the authority of the Outer Rim Territories Oversector Moff appointed directly by Palpatine. Grant understood that Palpatine wanted to defang the senate by putting as much power into his own unelected regional governors as possible. The fact that he subordinated sector fleets to those same governors made little sense. Not only did it create an awkward merger between military and civilian elements, it decentralized the navy and made it more difficult to serve the Empire's larger interests and more likely to serve the petty ambitions of the moffs. Grant knew that well; his own moff was particularly ambitious.

Grant clasped his hands behind his back and waited for a response from Eriadu. It took nearly a minute before the man's face appeared as a flickering blue hologram before him: long and gaunt, with high cheekbones, sunken eyes, and a receding hairline that all made Wilhuff Tarkin look considerably older than he was.

A brittle, polite smile settled on Tarkin's face. "Ah, Vice Admiral Grant, how good of you to contact me. What is it you wish to speak of?"

"Several things, sir. Have you been informed of the recent engagement over Farstine?"

"I have. Very careless, Vice Admiral, losing your only interdictor, and to a ragtag collection of terrorists at that. I heard footage of the battle got out somehow and is currently being rebroadcast on Bavinyar's news-nets. Syne has given her people a significant morale boost. Luckily for you, we've stopped it from spreading further."

Grant fought a scowl. His accusations were accurate and there was nothing to rebuke.

"Mistakes have been made, sir, but I assure you I will rectify them. Jereveth Syne has become an even bigger annoyance than her father, unfortunately, but I believe I know a way to deal with her."

"Do you now?" Tarkin arched one sharp eyebrow.

"I do, sir, but I am unable to at the moment. May I assume you know about our *other* recent development?"

"You may assume as much," Tarkin inclined his head slightly. In addition to having Palpatine's ear the man also had an unofficial information-gathering network that put Grant's to shame.

"Once the, ah, battlemoon completes its mission, will it be available for another one in this region?"

"That remains to be seen. Unfortunately, Vice Admiral, the *Eye* is not under my jurisdiction. Only the Emperor commands its use."

Grant had heard rumors that Tarkin was involved in the creation of some top-secret, large-scale weapon and had guessed that the *Eye* might be it. Tarkin's was not a military mind; he preferred shows of strength and power over the flexibility of a versatile battle group and the oversized, overpowered battlemoon was right up the moff's alley. Either Tarkin was lying now, or he had an even bigger project in the works.

Grant could figure that out later. "I understand the importance of hunting down the Jedi, sir. I assure you, they are our top priority, even above Syne."

Tarkin frowned. “I believe you are expected to hunt *both*, Vice Admiral.”

“Of course,” Grant said quickly. “However, in order to take down Syne I am going to require as many ships as possible, including a new interdictor and, if possible, an additional task force to guard Farstine.”

“You ask much, especially for a man who just lost a ship through his own fault.”

Grant's chest tightened. “I mean no offense, sir, but there were no intelligence reports indicating that Zozridor Slayke was operating in this sector. *None*, sir, at least none that I've have access to.”

It hadn't appeared on any other reports that Grant had scrounged up either, not that it would excuse his failure.

“Slayke's appearance was... unexpected. You talk as though you have a plan to deal with him as well as Syne. If you can remove those two thorns from the Empire's side, I'm sure the Emperor will be most grateful.”

“I only wish to please him.”

“No need to scrape and bow. Get on with it,” Tarkin said evenly.

Grant took a breath. “Our strategy regarding Syne, as well as Slayke, has been fundamentally reactive thus far. They've only survived through hit-and-run attacks that avoid prolonged fleet engagement. At Farstine they ran as soon as two additional destroyers showed up, despite having taken minimal damage in battle.”

“How do you intend to force a confrontation?”

Grant allowed a slight smile. Tarkin was notoriously bloody-minded; he was going to love this. “I am going to lay siege to Bavinyar and begin orbital bombardment, targeting one settlement at a time. If Syne wants to save any of her people, she will have to come to me.”

“And if she doesn't, she will be utterly discredited,” Tarkin's smile was brittle and cold. “Very good. I believe it stands a chance of working.”

“Then you’ll recommend the allocation of more ships?”

Tarkin thought a moment. “It may take several days, but I believe it is possible. In the meantime, you have other business to oversee. Hopefully it will be completed by then.”

“Of course, Moff Tarkin. The *Eye of Palpatine* is preparing for its first mission as we speak.”

“Excellent. Have you located the Jedi base yet, Vice Admiral?”

“Ah, no, sir. My understanding, based on what Commodore Zaarin has told me, is that the *Eye* is sending out probes.”

“Correct. I have also put all of the oversector's intelligence resources at his disposal.”

That was something neither Tarkin nor Zaarin had seen fit to mention until now. He'd had little hope before of getting credit for exterminating the Jedi base, wherever it was, and it was all gone now.

All the more motivation to defeat Syne, then. Grant forced a thin smile. “It should only be a matter of time, then.”

“Tell me, what backup have you assigned to oversee *Eye*'s operation?”

What backup, not *if* or *whether*. Perhaps Tarkin had as little trust in Ohran Keldor's creation as Grant did. “I've assigned two destroyers with full fighter compliments.”

“And you trust the captains?”

“Two of my best.”

Salvation's Captain Hornar had a reputation for dull but reliable competence. *Valediction*'s Gilad Pellaeon was a trickier type, with a strong combat record but a reputation was marred by stories of affairs with women unbefitting a gentleman.

One of those affairs had collided with his professional duties at the start of the war and he wasn't going to be looking at a promotion any time soon, not unless he was the one to finally net Syne. Setting him to babysit the *Eye* was an ideal way to make sure he stayed where he

belonged and also to safeguard the *Eye*'s mission. Two mynocks, one stone.

"I am glad to hear the *Eye* is in safe hands. These untested weapons can be quite, ah, *surprising* when used in combat for the first time."

No, the *Eye* wasn't Tarkin's creation. He spoke of it like a competitor unworthy of respect.

"I will do everything in my power to complete both missions you've given to me, sir. An additional task force at Farstine would go a very long way to achieving both goals."

"Then I'll see to it that you get it," Tarkin nodded. "I will keep you informed, Vice Admiral. Good day."

"Good day, sir," Grant snapped a salute. Tarkin nodded again, and his image disappeared.

Grant lowered his hand to his side. He blew a long breath out through his nose, went over to the carved-wood desk passed down through five generations of Grants, sat down, and pulled open the bottom drawer. He had a glass and a bottle of Churban brandy inside, and he needed them badly.

Like the rest of the ship, *Iconoclast*'s conference room was cramped and starting to show its age. *Iconoclast* had been part of Bavinyar's modest home defense fleet for over twenty years, and the years since had hardly been kind to it. The cushions of the seats were cracked and torn in places, while a discolored wall and deep scrape marks over the plasteel table-top stood as mementos of the time a Republic missile had tore a hole through the ship's outer bulkhead.

It was good, then, that Zozridor Slayke was not big on comforts and appearances.

"We ducked out in a hurry, but not before we could grab a souvenir," Slayke told them. He leaned forward with a datapad in his hands and his elbows on the tabletop. Hallena Devis sat to his right while Syne, Hett, and Yvolton faced him across the oblong table.

“What kind of souvenir?” Hett asked.

“You saw those nifty new starfighters that asteroid was pumping at you?”

“Unfortunately, we did. They destroyed one of our corvettes, despite possessing no heavy weapons.” Syne said.

“They're not well-armored either, but they're quick,” Slayke said. “Well, the point is, we pulled two-thirds of one into our hangar.”

“Two thirds?” Yvolton asked.

“One of our snub pilots clipped off a solar panel. We caught it with a tractor beam before it could hit our shields.”

“Did you capture the pilot?”

“We're working him over, but he doesn't seem to know what his mission was going to be. He's clone, and the Imps treat them like cannon fodder, so I’m inclined to believe him. We'll keep up the interrogation, but I'm inclined to think he's telling the truth.” He glanced at Hett. “A second opinion would be welcome, of course.”

Jedi weren't magicians, but most beings didn't know that. Peering into other being's minds was always invasive and Hett had never felt comfortable with it.

“I'll consider it,” he said simply.

Slayke waved a hand, like it wasn't important. “Anyway, the fighter's been more valuable than the pilot. We're taking it apart, learning how it works, and so far we've found something interesting in its comm system.”

He placed the datapad on the table and slid it across. It skidded over the scratch marks and into Syne's hands. Hett leaned over her shoulder to get a better view of the screen, which seemed to show repeating lines of a binary algorythm.

“The transmitter was repeating that on a constant wide-band, low-level freq,” Slayke said. “It looks like it's set to go constantly, even when the comm system's also used for normal communications.”

"What does it mean?" Syne asked.

"Well, I had to hear my wizard techs spell it out in Basic, but apparently that's a very sophisticated identify-friend-or-foe signal."

"Most starfighters have IFF transponders," Hett said. "They usually operate separately from the comm."

"Exactly." Slayke snapped his fingers. "Now, the conclusion my wizards came to was this: that signal was an IFF beacon marking the fighter as friendly for the automated guidance system on the asteroid."

Hett had already explained that the asteroid had felt virtually empty of crew in the Force. From there it had been easy to assume that the ship was operated by some manner of elaborate artificial intelligence.

"It does make sense," Yvolton rubbed his chin. "They would want a very specialized IFF system to keep the station's AI from firing on its own ships."

"The question is whether we can modify our own ships to broadcast the same signal," Syne said.

"Exactly." Slayke snapped his fingers again. "My wizards are already looking into it, but there's your copy of the signal and the specs. I figure two crews working on the same project might get results faster."

"We can only hope. Thank you for sharing, Mr. Slayke."

"Not at all, Madam. We're on the same side, after all."

Devis cleared her throat. "Is that our goal, then? To team up to destroy that battlestation?"

"Well, it would be a nice feather in our caps," Slayke scratched his beard again. "We're going to need a lot more data on that thing before we attempt a real assault."

"The battle station was literally built *inside* the hollowed-out asteroid," Hett said. "It has powerful shields as well as natural armor. Even if we threw all our ships at it, we'd only make a dent."

"We're going to have to do something," Yvolton said. "If Grant has added that... thing to his sector fleet, it's going to find us if we don't find it."

“That... may not be the case,” Hett folded his hands on the table. Every eye fell on him.

“What is it, A'Sharad?” Syne asked.

“When I approached that asteroid in my starfighter, when I searched it with the Force, I found a presence there... I should say, it found me.”

“Another Jedi?” asked Devis.

“There was... some Force-user. I don't think it was a Jedi. It seemed to be... in service of the Empire.”

“We've heard about those,” Slayke said. “They're called 'Inquisitors.' Palpatine's Force-powered henchmen. A lot of them seem to be popping up lately, mostly hunting down Jedi.”

Hett frowned. “We didn't know of them. I've heard of Darth Vader, but I didn't know Palpatine had other Jedi hunters. What are they? Force-sensitives he's been training? Padawans he’s corrupted?”

Slayke shrugged. “I never understood how all that works, so don't ask me.”

“But have you heard of any names?” The idea that Jedi might have turned against their own rather than die with them was a terrible one, and before Order 66 he wouldn't have believed it, but the past year had taught him how desperate some beings could get to survive.

“Hmmm... There was one that sounded important...” Slayke looked to Devis. “Do you remember it?”

The woman thought a moment. “I believe the name was Jerec. Is that familiar?”

“Jerec,” Hett repeated. He could summon a face, a reputation, but he'd never had any close interaction with the man. “He was a scholar, an archaeologist. The last I heard he went on some deep-space research mission before the war even started.”

“Perhaps he was working with Palpatine all this time,” Syne suggested.

“Maybe... They said he was very intelligent, but also... aloof. I don't know. That's just what I've heard.”

He found himself strangely relieved. He'd been following HoloNet reports and gathering intelligence to keep track of the Jedi being purged, and there were only a few friends left from the Order whose names he hadn't seen: K'Kruhk, Quinlan Vos, Anakin Skywalker. He couldn't imagine K'Kruhk turning dark but Anakin and Vos had always had deep anger in them.

"This Force-user," Devis asked, "Did they communicate anything with you?"

"In a way." He flicked his eyes up to hers. "They seemed surprised, just like I was, but only at first. They said they're coming for Jedi. For all of us."

"What does that *mean* precisely?" asked Yvolton.

"That *thing* is after Jedi." Devis sounded suddenly scared. "That's why it's here."

"Are there Jedi in this sector?" Syne asked. "Aside from present company?"

Slayke made a guttural sound in his throat. Devis said, "I already explained this to Master Hett, but I've spent the past few years with a group of Jedi. Not *only* Jedi, but there are many Jedi among them. They didn't serve as generals in the GAR so they weren't eradicated by Order Sixty-Six."

"Palpy's been trying to nail them for months," Slayke said. "Looks like they finally know were to find them."

"It's not that simple," Devis said. "Djinn Altis travels in a ship. He's not easy to pin down. Unless..."

She trailed off, looked away.

"What is it?" Hett asked. "Are there *more* Jedi somewhere?"

"There are a few... safehouses on planets in this sector. I don't even know the locations, only Djinn does."

"He needs to be warned."

"He does." Davis looked at Slayke. "Sir, this is important. I'd like to send a message as soon as possible."

Slayke glanced at Syne. "It's your ship, Madam."

"It can be arranged," Hett said quickly. "These safehouses, do they have the ships to evacuate quickly?"

"I have no idea."

"I must point out," Yvolton said, "That we don't even know *if* that battlestation is targeting Jedi safehouses. We certainly don't know *which* ones it will attack. We shouldn't be rash."

"They may be trying to flush your friends out of hiding," Slayke told Devis. "They should be put on alert, but they shouldn't evacuate until they know the battle-station's coming for them."

"It could be too late by then," Devis's voice cracked.

"Then they should do reconnaissance," Hett insisted. "Meanwhile, we can start laying out evacuation plans. We can make sure we have enough ships, and enough weapons if it comes to a fight."

"*If* is still the operative word here," Yvolton reminded them.

Eyes fell quietly onto Syne, who sat with her arms crossed, saying nothing. Hett knew her dilemma. She had too few ships, and she had priorities beyond protecting the Jedi whom most of her crew still hated.

If it weren't for Hett himself, she wouldn't even be considering it, so he decided to take the burden off of her.

"If Slayke is willing to spare a handful of ships," he said, "I'll help coordinate efforts. You can keep *Iconoclast* in hiding and try to figure out Grant's next move."

Syne shifted her gaze to the red-haired man. "*Will* you spare any ships?"

"A handful. Hallena and her friends have been helpful. I owe them a debt."

By that logic, so did Syne, but she didn't rise to the bait. "Very good. A'Sharad, please take Miss Devis to the bridge so she can make a secure call."

"Thank you." He rose to his feet and so did Devis. They walked quickly out of the room and down the hall, and she matched his long fast strides.

"Thanks for the help," she told him.

"If there's Jedi in danger I'll do what I can."

"If we have to send a rescue party, will you come?"

"I have a Headhunter. I'll go wherever you go."

They stepped into the lift tube. As the doors hissed shut she faced him and asked, "Have you thought about staying with Master Altis?"

He shook his head. "I have obligations here."

"I could tell," she said, "By the way you look at her."

He looked away from her, suddenly uncomfortable. He was used to beings finding Jedi distant and incomprehensible. Sometimes he preferred it that way. "These people need me. Not just Syne."

"I know." The door hissed open and they stared walking down the hallway toward the bridge. "Sometimes, there's more important things than being with who you want to be."

It was, Hett realized, a lesson he hadn't learned, not yet. It was coming, though, he could feel that. Call it the Force, call it his gut, but he could feel it, and when it came, it would hurt.

10

"After we lost Kyrimorut, we scattered to keep the Imps and Death Watch off our tail, but we didn't stay separate for long. We all had a place we needed to go, and business we needed to finish. But until that reunion, we had time to catch our breaths, to look back on what had just happened, and to mourn the ones we'd left behind."

For Kal Skirata, the only way to keep ahead of grief was to keep moving. That was no problem; they might have escaped Mandalore but they were far from safe, and there was a pile of things to be done until they were. He preferred it that way. If he stopped *doing* things then the grief would finally catch up to him, grief for Gilamar and Jilka and Kyrimorut, grief that was still fresh even though it had been almost a year since Etain's death.

The first step was to contact Djinn Altis. They were still going to offload their excess passengers, that part hadn't changed, even if some of the Jedi were on *Cornucopia* and others on *Aay'han*. The freighters, and Vau's Aggressor, would rendezvous once they figured out where to find Altis

The old Jedi Master kept on the move in his mobile academy ship, and he'd given Jaing the special encryption key to contact him no matter where either of them were. To make the call they'd use the same kind of hardware they used to contact Niner and Darman, and it had been a stroke of luck, genius, or both to install that equipment in *Cornucopia*'s auxiliary cargo hold.

Even as Ny's freighter tore through hyperspace, Jaing was busy at the comm system. Skirata crouched over the Null's shoulder and watching him work, though he had only half an idea of what was going on. Gadgets and fancy tech were for the young, and in spite of all that had happened he felt a warm glow inside knowing that Jaing and the rest of his brothers were going to grow old like men, not disposable tools in another stupid feud between the Jedi and the Sith. They still had that victory at least.

When he finished typing something into the computer's keypad Jaing craned his neck back and said, "Okay, *buir*, I sent out a ping to Altis' people. Hopefully they'll pick up."

"How long will it take?"

"However long Altis wants it to, but the signal's almost instantaneous. After this he can tell us where to rendezvous and offload our Jedi."

"Good job, son." Skirata clapped his armored shoulders. "There's something else I need you to do now. You're going to have to make a call to Mandalore."

Jaing frowned. "Who to?"

"Yayax Squad. We need to tell them we've been chased off-planet. And they need to know about Uthan's cure. I don't know how we'll get it to them, but we will."

"Death Watch and the Imps might know about Yayax. They might have moved on them, too. Or they might be watching them hard."

"Okay, how about Levet? He keeps a low profile; I doubt they've found him. Contact Levet with one of those top-level ARC security encryption keys, something only he'll know. Once we contact him he can spread to word to Yayax, Bralor, and the rest."

"*Buir...*" Jaing trailed off, suddenly reluctant to speak.

Skirata blew out a breath. You're wondering how the Imps found us, aren't you?"

"It must have something to do with Niner and Darman. The timing *can't* be a coincidence."

"Niner and Dar wouldn't betray us," Skirata snapped.

"I'm not saying that." Jaing held up both hands. "What if the Imps were using them? I don't know if you've heard him, *buir*, but their new captain is a hardcore Jedi-hunter. He's from Dromund Kaas and *hates* Force-users with a passion."

"Well, he's not gonna last long under Palps."

"I know, but right now he's got this holy mission. He might have sent Dar and Niner to Mandalore expressly to flush you out."

"It's possible."

"More than possible, *buir*. Death Watch is too stupid to find Kyrimorut on its own and Shysa's done his best to keep the garrison limited to Keldabe. *Someone* tipped them off to our location and if I had to bet, I'd say it was Dar and Niner. Even if they didn't mean to. We need to treat them as compromised from here on."

"What do you want to do, then? Write 'em off?"

"No. I don't know. We just need to rethink things."

Skirata snorted. "Next I was going to tell you to comm Niner and ask what the *shab* happened."

"I still could, assuming the comms we placed in their *buy'ce* haven't been sapped."

"Do you think they could be?"

"Anything's possible. I'm going to see if I can't fix a new encryption algorithm, something it'll be harder for the Imps to crack." Jaing balled a grey-gloved hand into a fist and banged his armored thigh. "I could really use *Mer'ika* right now."

"Well, he's stuck on *Aay'han*. It's all you now."

"I'll do my best, *buir*."

"I know. Start with a message to Levet. Make sure he's got our freq so he can talk back to us."

"Will do."

"Good lad."

Skirata patted Jaing on the shoulder and stood up. It was harder than it should have been; he hadn't even done much fighting but his legs and lower back still hurt.

Feeling old, Skirata shuffled his way into *Cornucopia*'s main hold to find a strange tableau. The central aisle leading to the cockpit was clear and people were divided on either side of the path, all seated on the floor with their legs folded or sticking out and their backs against the bulkheads.

Three bodies were lined up along the port wall. Laseema had both legs sticking out and one of them wrapped in a bacta bandage hastily pulled from Ny's emergency medical kit. What she really needed was a cast, and he hoped Altis would have better equipment on his ship. Laseema leaned on Atin's shoulder; her yellow hand touched his armored thigh and his hand in turn rested on hers. Laseema seemed to be sleeping and Atin was talking in whispers to Corr.

Corr liked to put up a front of wisecracks and cynicism, something he'd picked up from Mereel, but now the young man was visibly stricken by Jilka's sudden loss. Skirata hoped Atin could help him through that, just a little.

Meanwhile, Kina Ha was sitting in the forward starboard corner by herself. Her tall head still nearly brushed the low ceiling but her eyes were closed and as though she were sleeping. Skirata hadn't recalled seeing a *kaminii* sleeping before; it had always seemed one of those normal functions that seemed beyond them, like eating and laughing and caring about anything besides playing god with lesser mortals.

Down the starboard bulkhead, his daughter was sitting on the floor and playing with Venku. Uthan sat next to her and watched, stone-faced, closed off into herself like she'd been when they first took her prisoner.

Venku wasn't ready to walk yet but he was a fierce crawler, and Ruu was doing her best to egg him on. *Kad'ika*'s meager collection of toys were left on Mandalore, but Ruu was going her best to make funny noises and goofy faces. Venku giggled like a normal child, like nothing awful had happened to change his life forever.

As she scooped him up in her arms, Ruu's eyes flicked up to meet her father's, and he was surprised by the strength he saw there. He'd dragged her back into his life right at the same time it started going to hell but she wasn't blaming him for it. She was soldiering on, trying to make the best of the situation for herself and for people in need.

He felt proud. Then he wondered where Besany was. She'd always mothered Venku the most.

He walked into the cockpit to find Ny sitting in the pilot's seat alone. He couldn't tell if she was asleep or staring out at the blue blur of hyperspace. He took a step closer and a floor panel creaked; she turned around to look at him.

For a second he didn't know what to say. Then he mumbled, "Sorry if I interrupted."

"Just thoughts, Shorty."

He needed to go find Besany, but he wanted to stay with Ny. He sat down in the co-pilot's chair and said, "I'm sorry. About all this."

"Don't be," she reached over and put a hand over his. "You lost a lot today and it wasn't your fault."

"I dragged you into my mess. You're a fugitive now. This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't helped me."

"I already *was* a fugitive. Palpatine's hit list, remember?"

"You're taking this well." He smirked a little. "Always knew you were Mando material."

"I don't like shooting stuff, or clunky armor, so no thanks." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Kal, what I did was my choice. I started helping your clones because I *liked* them. I thought they deserved better than what the Republic gave them. And I brought those Jedi to you for pretty much the same reason. I knew what I was doing every step of the way."

"You can't be okay with what happened."

"I'm not. I don't *like* being a fugitive, but if I am going to be one I want it to be because I'm saving lives from Palpatine. If you can't do something smart, do something right. That's what I say."

Skirata snorted. “I guess that's a good motto.”

“Best I've heard.”

She smiled a little, and the flickering blues and whites of hyperspace made her look strangely luminous. That smile, the darkness of her eyes, felt like a promise of rest, an escape from all his worries.

He couldn't have that, not until all his boys were safe.

“Have you seen *Bes'ika*?” he asked suddenly.

“Isn't she in the main cabin?”

“No. She's not with Jaing in the auxiliary hold either.”

“Well, check the bunks. Or the engineering section. You know, cramped little corridor by the engines?”

“Why would she be in there?”

“Not many other places to hide unless she's locked herself in the 'fresher.”

“Thanks. I'll take a look.”

Skirata got up without another word. He walked through the main hold and waved to Venku as he played with Ruusaan, then clambered up the ladder leading to a low-ceiling room where bedrolls would normally be laid out. There was no Besany there either, so he went back down the ladder and went into the narrow corridor leading to the engineering section. He was still in his armor and he had to angle his body sideways just to squeeze between the bulkheads.

When he got to the dark room at the end he heard the soft beeping of computer monitors, the periodic hissing of the heat sink, and Besany's choking sobs. He was about to turn her around and leave her with her pain when he remembered something; the first night on Kyrimorut after Etain had died, when Besany had been there for him when grief finally caught up and he cried it all out alone on the kitchen floor.

He rapped his knuckles on a pipe before going further. Besany stopped crying and croaked, “Who's there?”

“It's me, *Bes'ika*.”

“Oh, Kal,” she exhaled.

"Can I come in?"

"It's okay. Sure. I was... almost done."

Skirata still didn't have much room to maneuver as he walked into the chamber. Besany was sitting at the far end of the narrow room, her shoulder against the wall, her legs folded up against her chest and her head bowed so gold hair spread across her knees. Skirata couldn't squeeze into a similar position so he knelt down in front of her, kneepads scraping the durasteel floor-plating.

"Jilka wasn't your fault, *Bes'ika."*

"Isn't it?" Her head was still low. "You know, we were just starting to... be friends again. Jilka was getting used to Mandalore, as much as she could. She had Corr. She had things to do. She wasn't happy, and I *knew* she wasn't happy, and I knew it was my fault, but-"

"It's not," Skirata repeated.

"Really?" She picked her head up. "And if I told you Mij wasn't your fault, what would you say?"

The grief he'd been trying to keep at bay reared up inside him. Stuck here in this dark, cramped place there were no distractions and no escape.

"Because Mij dying *wasn't* your fault," Besany said, voice surprisingly firm. "It was his choice to go out there and fetch Uthan's equipment."

And it was his choice to murder Dred Priest and bring Death Watch down on Kyrimorut. If the debacle had been anyone's fault it was probably Mij Gilamar's most of all. That's what Vau would have said; it was the main reason Skirata hadn't tried to comm the man since their escape from Mandalore. He didn't want to hear cruel words about a dead friend, especially if they were true.

"Jilka was different," Besany continued. Her voice started to quake again. "Jilka had no choice in anything. She was just trying to make the best of a bad hand. Her only mistake, the one thing she did wrong, was make friends with me before any of this... this *osik* started. That's it. That's what killed her. Being friends with *me*."

Skirata knew what she was going through; he'd been through it himself time and again and he knew there was no amount of talking and consolation that would get her through her guilt. She would keep blaming herself, and slowly she'd learn to live with it, but she'd never be able to live the same way as before.

The best Skirata could do was try to help her along on the process, just a little. “She was getting better at the end though, wasn't she?”

Besany nodded slightly. “I think so. At the end.”

“Then we gave her that at least. We didn't slot her in Palpatine's prison cell, or leave her to get her brains scrambled by Imp torturers.”

“She was in that prison because we put her there. *I* did.”

“It was either that or let Palps get you, and if that happened we'd *all* be scrambled. You, me, Ordo, all your *vode*.”

“I know. I know.” She sniffed and pawed tears away from red eyes. “Kal... does this ever get easier?”

She meant guilt, using innocent people as tools, putting one life above another and rationalizing it after the fact.

“Yes,” he said, “It does.”

She sniffled. “It shouldn't.”

“I know. But it does.”

She titled her head back so her hair fell clear of her face. She stared into the bulkhead in front of her and muttered, barely loud enough to hear: “Good.”

Skirata rose to his feet and left her like that. He'd done all he could; the rest she'd have to do for herself.

Those of us who escaped on *Aay'han* had to collect ourselves without the help of our *buir*. I found myself falling into something of his role; part leader, part navigator, part counselor, part healer.

My first duty was to attend to Ordo. Maze's shot had torn the muscles in his leg without severing any major arteries, so we didn't have to worry about blood loss, but *Aay'han*

still had a subpar on-board emergency medical kit without even a strong sedative. A'den and Maze held him down while Zey and I pulled his leg out of its armor and wrapped it in bacta bandages. He was clearly still in pain, so I leaned over, placed one hand on his head, and used the Force to urge him into sleep. When he finally stopped writhing I placed both hands over the wound and did my best to evaluate it through the Force.

I could feel the damage to his muscle tissue and minor blood vessels; their tears and burns felt like unnatural ruptures in the fabric of Ordo's body. I felt the hairline fractures to his femur as well, which might form deeper breaks if he tried to walk or even stand.

Healing was still a new skill to me then. I remembered how I'd cajoled the tissue in Fi's brain, nudged and prodded it with the Force until the synapses started flaring again. Compared to fixing Fi, healing Ordo's leg was simple, but I still felt overwhelmed. As I tried to mend the cracks in his bone and muscle I felt another presence added its power to mine. Zey was no healer either, but he could lend my some of his strength to the Force. He was a great help then.

After I'd done what I could, A'den showed up with some slim metal pipes and knotted cable that we turned into a splint. When all that was done I touched his mind once more in the Force and sent soothing thoughts. He didn't stir, didn't wake. He would heal better while he slept.

Once that was as settled as it could get, A'den and I went up to the cockpit to check on Fi and Mereel, leaving Maze and Zey to keep watch over the wounded man.

"How's it going, *Mer'ika*?" A'den leaned over the other Null's shoulder.

Mereel shifted in the pilot's seat. "Just floating around now, waiting for *Cornucopia* to tell us where to go."

"Are we sure Altis will take us after all this?" A'den glanced at me, as did Mereel.

It annoyed me that my brothers still saw me, sometimes at least, as a Jedi, or Jedi-like, but it was Fi who said,

“He'll take us. We're not staying long anyway, just enough to drop off the Jedi and get Ordo help.”

“What about the memory wipes?” A'den kept looking at me. “Are you still doing those?”

“I'm not sure there's a point,” I sighed. “It's not like we have a base to hide.”

“Still,” said Mereel, “It might be safer.”

I didn't want to tell them that I hated doing memory wipes; it made me feel manipulative and dirty, like I was stealing someone else's deepest secrets. They'd think I was soft, not fully committed to the clan, and I wasn't totally sure they'd be wrong.

“I'll talk to *Kal'buir* when the time comes,” I said lamely. “Anything from him or Vau, *Mer'ika*?”

“Only pings when they pop in and out of hyperspace.”

“Think the Imps are still chasing us?” Fi asked.

“I doubt it, but it never hurts to keep moving.” Mereel stretched his long arms. “How's the crew holding up back there?”

“Ordo's asleep. I did all I could for him. He should be okay until we find Altis.”

“What about the kid?” Fi asked.

“She's quiet,” I said grimly. Scout had been huddled in the far corner of the hold the whole time, knees against her chest, head down, not speaking to anyone.

“She was really starting to like *Mij'ika*,” Fi said.

“We all liked *Mij'ika*.” I wondered for the first time how Uthan was holding up. She was older and stronger than Scout, but she'd already taking a lot of losses and Gilamar had been a balm on that wound. She seemed pretty tough mentally, but everyone has a breaking point and she must have been getting close to hers. I felt glad that we’d already gotten what we needed from her, followed by immediate shame of that gladness.

“The kid was good in the fight,” A'den said. “Better than I thought. Saved my *shebs* when she cut a Death Watch *chakaar* in two.”

"Oh," I moaned. Suddenly it all made sense. "That's... not good."

"It was from where I was standing."

"I bet," Mereel said, "And hey, a little less Death Watch in the galaxy means she did us all a favor."

I sighed. "I'm going to have to talk to her."

"Good luck," Fi said seriously.

I left them in the cockpit and went back into the hold to do the hardest part of the job. Healing Ordo's leg was child's play compared to healing Scout's hurt.

I walked past Maze and Zey, who were still keeping watch over Ordo, and sat down beside Scout. She was in the same position, forehead resting on her knees, and she didn't seem to react to my presence.

I figured I needed to get her mind onto something other than what had just happened, so I asked, "What do you plan to do when we get to Altis's ship?"

At first she didn't move. Then, slowly, a little cautiously, she lifted her head and looked at me. Her eyes weren't red; she hadn't been crying. They looked sunken and empty instead, which in some ways was worse.

"I don't know where I can go," she said quietly. "I just want..." She trailed off. I waited. Finally, she said, "I just want to be back at the Temple again."

I hadn't been expecting that, though I probably should have. She wanted the security of high walls, the comfort of routine. "You can't go back again. None of us can. You have to decide what happens tomorrow."

"I just want to be somewhere else," she said weakly.

"Do you still want to stay with us? Or do you want to go with Master Altis?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything."

"That's okay. There's still time. You can decide later."

"If I go with Altis... Will you erase my memory?"

I didn't look over my shoulder at Zey and Maze. "I'm not sure if there's really a point in that. It's not like we have a secret base we need to protect."

"Okay," she sniffed. "Can you erase it anyway?"

Zey appeared beside me. "Scout, you don't want that. You may think you do right now, but you don't."

She glanced at him and frowned. "Right now I want to forget about Mij. I want to forget about Mandalore, all of it. I just want to *forget*..."

"You did what you had to down there, Scout." I told her. Zey looked a question at me but I ignored him. "A'den's really thankful. He just told me. All of them are."

"I *killed* someone," she said, "I cut him in *two.* A man's *dead* because of me."

I didn't tell her that the universe was better off with one less Death Watch thug; neither she nor Zey would have taken that well. I believed it, though, very much, which probably meant I was more Mando than Jedi after all, despite a bout of backsliding. The thought didn't comfort me much.

"As Jedi we call ourselves keeps of peace," Zey said, "But sometimes that necessitates violence, even taking the lives of others so more lives can be saved. It always has. We have to be aware of that. It's part of our responsibility *as* Jedi."

"I don't want that responsibility."

"That's good. You should never be comfortable with it. You should never take your power over other beings for granted." He paused for a long moment, deep in his own thoughts, then said, "When killing becomes easy, that means we've gone astray."

It was as much a rebuke to me as comfort to Scout. I felt angry at him then, even though he was giving Scout a little solace that I couldn't.

"I don't want to hurt anyone," Scout muttered, "Ever again."

Zey looked at her for a long moment, and then he surprised me. "Then perhaps the path of the Jedi is not for you."

Her head snapped up. "It is. I want to be a Jedi. I just..."

"You can talk with Master Altis when we meet him," I said. Zey didn't object.

"Okay," It came out as a groan. "I'll need to think about it."

"You have plenty of time," I told her, then added, "I'm sure you'll make the right choice, whatever that is."

She didn't respond. I rose to my feet. Zey didn't. I left them there in the hold and went back to the cockpit. I strained to hear if they resumed their conversation, but there was nothing.

I'm a little ashamed to admit it, but I was glad to get away the Jedi and return to my brothers. With them I felt something closer to belonging.

Whatever Jedi healing trance Jusik put Ordo in, it worked well. The big Null, normally so restless and energetic, laid still as death for hours before his eyelids finally fluttered open.

Maze was waiting for him when they did. Ordo's gummy eyes met Maze's and they didn't look away. Maze had been waiting hours to say it but now that he finally got the chance it was hard to make any words come out.

The best he could manage was, "I'm sorry."

Ordo blinked but didn't look away. "Wasn't your fault."

"I went edgy during the fight. I fired too soon."

"And I should have identified myself. We both messed up. Forget it, Maze." He looked away, finally.

"Ordo, I want to know if we're okay."

"Okay? We've never been okay."

"I know. But I want to be."

Ordo looked back at him. "Do you now?"

"Yes. I do."

There was a long pause. "Why?"

"I don't like owing people debts. I don't like depending on them."

Ordo watched him carefully. "Well, I guess we've got that much in common."

Maze nodded slightly.

Ordo thought for a moment, then added, “Thanks for rushing out there to get Laseema and *At'ika*. You didn't have to.”

“It was the least I could do after you people sheltered us. Like I said, I don't like owing people.”

“Especially barves you don't like?” He grinned weakly. When Maze didn't respond the smile wilted and he said, “What are you and Zey going to do once we find Master Altis?”

“I don't know,” he said honestly. “We haven't talked about it.”

“They're from two different schools, aren't they? Don't expect Zey and Altis to get along. They'll probably end up going separate ways.”

According to Zey, he'd never ever met Altis in person, and whatever doctrinal schism they had as Jedi, he thought they'd be able to put aside any differences for the sake of keeping their brotherhood alive while the Empire tried to hunt them to extinction.

Of course, Maze and the Nulls were brothers too. Some differences were harder than others to put aside.

“You know what you should do?”

“What?”

“You should live a long time,” Ordo said seriously. “Find a pretty girl, make a bunch of half-clone babies.”

“Is that what you plan to do?”

“I'm already halfway there,” Ordo smiled a little. “Live, damn it. You've spent all your life with your nose in a datapad, reading about troop reports or politics or philosophy of whatever *osik.* None of that matters, Maze. It's all *osik*.”

Maze wanted to tell him that if other beings read and cared about politics as much as he did, Palpatine wouldn't have taken over the Republic without anybody noticing, but he held his tongue. It was bad form to argue with a man when he was trying to be nice to you.

Ordo reached out and squeezed Maze's forearm. “Nothing's more important than family, Maze, *aliit*. You may say that's all *Mando osik* but it's not.”

The closest thing Maze had to family was Arligan Zey. It wasn't a family bonded by love like Skirata's sprawling clan was. Maze didn't know what love was, romantic or fraternal; it was something neither his training sergeants, the Jedi, or his books never talked about. His bond with Zey was made of trust and respect, and for now, that was good enough.

He put his free hand on Ordo's shoulder, felt the slight rise and fall of his body with breath, and nodded.

11

"I think I felt a connection with the clones from the start because, in some ways, they were a lot like Jedi. We'd all been raised from childhood to be part of something we had no say in and didn't truly understand. Breaking through a lifetime of indoctrination was never easy because you could never, in the end, leave it all behind you. It would always stay in the back of your mind, lingering, sometimes as a source of comforting nostalgia, and sometimes as the opposite of everything good, the constant source of your rebellion."

Their blastboat hung in orbit over Mandalore. The planet had turned its nightside face to them and the empty blackness of the sparsely-populated world felt like a yawning void over which they were precariously suspended, and likely to plunge into at any moment.

Niner sat in the pilot's seat now. He was calling up a comm channel back to Coruscant, but he was taking his time. Rede was at the auxiliary station again, waiting patiently with his hands in his lap like a good student. Darman stood silently in the back of the cabin but looked restless. His hands dangled at his sides but his fingers twitched and his head sometimes jerked a little, like he was having some private angry conversation entirely in his head.

Niner knew the feeling. As he worked the console he flicked his helmet's comlink onto Dar's private channel.

"You're quiet," he said simply.

He waited. No response. He glanced briefly back and saw Darman, still standing there, staring at the bulkhead.

"We tell Roly everything that happened, as it happened," Niner said. "We don't get angry. We don't accuse him of anything. We act like good soldiers, okay?"

Dar still didn't say anything. Niner held back a curse. If Darman stood there the whole time and didn't say anything to Melusar, Niner could handle it, but he was afraid his brother might snap again. The man had already lost his wife, and now he'd and nearly gotten his brothers and father killed. Niner wasn't okay either, but he could pretend he was when he had to. He was the squad sergeant and faking confidence was one of a lot of leadership traits he'd learned from *Kal'buir.*

"Just let me do the talking, Dar. I'll take care of it."

"When will we talk to them?" Darman said finally.

Them meant *Kal'buir,* Mereel, Jaing, and the rest of their brothers. "We don't know if it's safe. They'll call us when they're ready."

He didn't know that, but he had to believe.

"Are we ready?" Rede said suddenly.

Niner quickly switched his helmet speaker on. "Almost. Give me a second."

He started tight-casting the signal back to Coruscant. He waited while the message transferred and bounced back. It seemed to take longer than usual, but right now Niner's nerves were so messed up he didn't trust his own senses.

Finally, a blue hologram flickered to life over the main console. Rede and Darman stood behind Niner's chair and looked down at the small electronic replica of their captain.

"Greetings," Melusar nodded curtly. "I've already received a report from the local garrison commander, so I don't need one from you."

He wasn't trying to hide his disappointment with the botched mission. That was good, Niner thought. It meant he was angry and off his game.

"By the time we arrived at the site the target had already escaped, sir. We were held up by orbital patrols while the garrison troops launched their attack."

Behind him, Rede said, "Sir, it appeared that the garrison was working with a Mandalorian militia that formed the first wave of the attack."

"I know." Melusar shook his head. "It was foolish of them. Unprofessional. If they'd managed to job properly the target wouldn't have gotten away."

"Sir, I suggest this mission would have gone differently had it been executed as first discussed." Darman spoke up. His voice was tight with his own restrained anger.

Melusar licked his lips. "Three troopers, however capable, inevitably require backup when going into unknown situations like this. My *hope* was that you would coordinate the attack with the local garrison on arrival."

"We didn't get much of a chance, sir," Niner said. "As soon as we gave them the coordinates they just charged in with their Death Watch buddies."

He wondered if he'd made a slip, outright naming Death Watch, but Melusar didn't seem to notice. "I'll see to it that the garrison commander faces a reprimand. It's the least he deserves."

Niner decided it was time to try the tricky part. "Sir, is there any lead to the location of the escaped ships?"

Melusar shook his head. "They've scattered. It seems that we've lost them."

Niner was glad he had a helmet to hide the relief on his face. "In that case, sir, what are your orders? Should we head back for Coruscant?"

Melusar didn't answer at first, which surprised Niner. He seemed to be thinking hard about a simple question, or maybe he was thinking about something else entirely.

Darman asked, "Do you want us to try and pursue the targets, sir?"

Niner wanted to swear at him, but Melusar just shook his head.

"Negative on that, Darman. And negative on Coruscant as well. I believe you'd be better suited to another task."

"What is that, sir?"

"I've received a request for Five-oh-First troops to be sent on detachment to the Outer Rim, Ryndellian Sector."

Niner checked his mental list of sector HQs. "Farstine, sir?"

"Exactly. I understand it is a good distance from your current location, but your blastboat is stocked for long-range travel, correct?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

"Very good. I'm currently selecting troops on Coruscant. We should arrive around the same time you do."

"May I ask what the mission entails, sir?"

"Does it involve Jedi?" Darman asked.

Melusar simply replied, "You'll receive your full briefing upon your arrival at Farstine."

"Yes, sir," Niner said. He hadn't expected much more than that. "Anything else, sir?"

Melusar's flickering holographic eyes seemed to pass over each of them, as though he could peer through their helmets. Then he shook his head. "That will be all for now, Niner. I will see you at Farstine."

"Very good, sir. Niner, out."

He turned off the comlink and blew out his tension inside his helmet. Behind him, Rede took off his bucket and bared his smooth young face to the blastboat's cold recycled air.

"Farstine," he mused. "That's Admiral Octavian Grant's headquarters, isn't it?"

"I think so." Niner removed his helmet too. He wasn't going to wear it all the way to Farstine. When his brothers called they'd get a light on the comm system.

"I believe Admiral Grant is still batting Separatist hold-outs in that sector. From... Bavinyar, I think."

Niner didn't know that. Once, during the war, he'd made a point to study all the news from all the campaigns. Now he wondered why any of that had felt important.

“I'm going to use the 'fresher,” Darman said. His helmet was still on.

“Don't let me stop you,” Niner said.

His brother walked fast out of the forward cabin, leaving Niner alone with Rede. The young sat down at the auxiliary station again and started doing engine checks.

Normally Niner didn't like being alone with Rede, but he felt, more than ever, that Darman was becoming a stranger too, so maybe it didn't matter.

He turned his attention to the forward console. “Hyperdrives ready, Rede?”

“Affirmative, sir.”

He pulled the blastboat away from the dark planet and pointed its nose to the stars. Once they cleared Mandalore's gravity well the stars stretched into hyperspace.

Niner had only stood on the planet that was supposed to be home for an hour. He doubted he would ever stand on it again.

Darman walked straight into the refresher, locked the door tight, and sat down. He worked the comm system on his helmet, connecting it to the blastboat's main transmitter. He doing his call the same way they'd called Kyrimorut. It wouldn't light up the console in the cockpit and if Niner checked the call logs he'd get an unknown destination. Darman hoped that would be enough. If not, too bad.

The call went through. He sat there, staring at the blank refresher door, waiting for a sound.

The voice come on without warning. “Greetings. Who is this?”

“This is Darman.”

“I'm not getting a holo-feed.”

“This is audio only. From my helmet.”

“I see.” Melusar's voice was flat. Even the anger from a minute ago was gone. “What is it, Darman?”

What he was doing was stupid. He was overplaying his hand. Niner would turn full Vau and thrash him if he found

out. He took a breath and said, “Did you go behind our backs with Rede?”

There was a long pause. He was glad Melusar couldn't see his face and Holy Roly probably felt likewise.

“I did,” he said simply.

“Why?”

“Darman, you've been a fine soldier. You've done great work for the Five-oh-First. However, I would be totally remiss if I sent you and Niner on a solo mission in which you clearly had a personal stake.”

“I was trying to get you your Jedi. You would have them now if you'd trusted me.”

“I want to believe that Darman, very much.”

“I can still get you those Jedi.”

There was a deathly silence. Then Melusar said, “How?”

“I have a way of communicating directly with Skirata's people.” Melusar wasn't stupid. He'd probably figured out as much.

“Were the Jedi hiding with Skirata?”

He only hesitated a second. “Yes, but they were going to shuttle the Jedi off to someone else, another group of Jedi. Man named Altis.”

He knew that would grab Melusar. “Does Skirata know where Altis is?”

“I don't know. We haven't spoken to them since they left Mandalore. I'm not even sure if we *can*. But if we do, I'll give you Altis' location.”

“And what do you want in return, Darman? Do you want us to let Skirata go?”

“I'll figure out a way to get them separate. You don't have to let him go, don't hunt him in the first place.”

“You realize you've already lied to me, Darman. I have little reason to trust you now.”

“If you want Altis, you'll have to.”

“That's not enough, Darman. *Why* should I trust you?”

“Because I want those Jedi dead more than anyone.” The line went silent. Darman shifted on his seat and added,

“My old boss is with them. Arligan Zey, your predecessor. I'm not even getting into what he did to me. I just want him gone.”

What Melusar said next surprised him. “Altis is the bigger prize.”

“Do you want a pretty prize or do you want to kill Jedi?” Darman snapped. He was letting his anger take over but he couldn't help himself.

“I want to make the galaxy safe from *all* Force-users, Darman,” Melusar said. “The same as you.”

“Then do we have an agreement?”

“There's no agreement to make. I'm your superior officer and I will *tell* you what to do.”

“Then what should I do? *Sir*?”

“I need Altis.”

“And if I get him for you?”

There was another long, drawn-out pause. “My goal is the pursuit of Jedi, not Mandalorians.”

“And if I separate them for you?”

“Then I will go after Altis, not Skirata.”

“Good. Then I'll give you Altis.”

He was about to switch off the connection when Melusar said, “What then, Darman?”

He knew what the man was asking, even if he didn't say it out loud.

“I don't know,” he said honestly. “We'll find out.”

Darman turned off the connection and removed his helmet. He pawed sweat from his forehead and stood up. He flushed the seat, in case anyone was listening for it, and stood in front of the sink. He stared at his reflection in the mirror: the tan skin, firm lips, and dark eyes of another man. That man had been a merciless killer who'd forsaken everyone and everything in exchange for one thing: his son.

“Sins of the father,” he muttered. He watched another man's lips say the words, but they were his lips too, and so were the sins.

12

"It was very strange for me to be running back to the Jedi for safe haven, just as it had been strange for Zey and the other Jedi to run to us, but I think it was strangest of all for Kal'buir*, Vau, and the Nulls. They'd spent their entire lives hating Jedi and looking down on them as manipulative self-righteous zealots, just as the Jedi looked down on Mandalorians as callous murderers without conscience or morals. In then end, despair was the great equalizer. It brought us all down to the same level."*

It was a lonely point in space, far from any planet or star system. *Cornucopia* hung in the void, her engines turned off, waiting. After she'd sat there for ten minutes another ship appeared: a boxy black Aggressor starfighter. Five minutes after that, *Aay'han* dropped into realspace.

"Well, gang's all here," Jaing muttered from his seat behind Skirata. "Now all we need is Altis to show up."

"You sure these are the right coordinates?" Ny asked from the pilot's seat.

"Dead sure. Right time too."

Nervous energy shot through Skirata's body but he kept himself planted in the cop-ilot's seat. There were a billion reasons why Altis would be a little late. He trusted the man, and what's more, he even *liked* the lively old Jedi. He knew Altis wouldn't leave them dangling, not unless something had gone horribly wrong, and he hoped the man would've sent Jaing a warning if that had happened.

"Anything in nearby space?" he asked Ny.

She shook her head. "Nothing for light-years. Definitely no ships."

Just as she finished speaking a proximity marker went off on her console. Skirata leaned forward, scanning the starfield ahead of them, but couldn't see anything.

"It's says there's something at eleven o'clock," Ny said, "It looks... small."

"I see it!" Jaing stabbed a finger forward. Skirata saw, just barely the glow of two thrust engines. The glow was getting brighter but it still wasn't very strong.

"It's a snubfigher," Mereel said. "Headhunter, maybe, or a Starchaser."

"Call him," Skirta told Ny, "Make him identify-"

"He's calling us," Ny reached for the comlink and switched it on. "This is freighter *Cornucopia*. Please state your identity."

"This is Jarvee," a voice, probably female, responded. "Please stand by."

And then something filled the viewport. Ny's proximity alarm started wailing strong and she used the freighter's directional repulsors to kick it away from the big, angular bulk that was looming in front of them.

"What the *shab* is that thing?" Corr said.

He and Ruu had suddenly appeared in the back of the cockpit, gaping at the massive starship. It was a blocky, misshapen thing that looked like it had been cobbled together from a half-dozen different cargo ships, all of them a century out of date.

"Another transmission," said Ny.

"Put him on," Skirata leaned forward.

The next voice was familiar, even over the static. "This is Djinn Altis speaking. Please identify."

"This is Skirata. I've got all my people here. Looks like you do too."

"Ah, Kal. Pleased to hear from you again."

"Please to be heard. Can we land on your, um-"

"We call her *Chu'unthor*. We're opening the belly hangar doors now. Please come right in."

The transmission clicked off. Ny whistled and said, "Pretty friendly for a hunted man."

"I trust him. Tell Vau and Mereel to take their ships in too."

"What an *ugly* ship," Corr gawked.

"You an art critic now?" Jaing asked.

"You know me, I dabble. How big is it?"

Skirata checked Ny's console. "Mass is roughly half of an *Acclamator*-class carrier."

"Still pretty big," Corr muttered.

Ny said, "I'm taking us in. Take your seats, everyone."

The flight into *Chu'unthor*'s hangar was smooth, but it still felt like they were being swallowed by an oversized space-worm. The flight deck was easily broad enough for three mid-sized starships to settle down in a row. The small R-41 Starchaser that had acted as Altis's scout ship followed them in and set down with a row of other old snubfighters along the port bulkhead. Its pilot quickly popped out of the cockpit and jogged over to join the gray-haired man walking casually across the deck to greet the new arrivals.

Skirata stepped out of *Cornucopia* first, followed by Jaing, Ruu, and Atin. Jusik, Fi, and Mereel came first out of *Cornucopia*, while Zey, Maze, and Scout all stepped cautiously onto the deck like they had to sniff the air. Meanwhile Vau, Kom'rk, and Prudii lingered at the base of the Aggressor fighter, apparently not ready to join the party.

"You're still looking hale, Master Altis," Skirata called to the welcoming party.

"Djinn, please." The gray haired man stopped a few meters in front of Skirata. He was wearing a loose tunic that didn't do much the paunch in his gut, but he moved with a lanky ease. His long gray hair was tied into a ponytail that whipped back and forth as he surveyed the arrivals.

"Well, I've met a few of you," he said, "Though I'll confess I"m not entirely sure *which* few."

"You met Ordo, but he's back in the ship," Jusik jabbed a thumb at *Aay'han*. "He's going to need medical attention."

"Oh dear." Altis's eyebrows scrunched. "Nothing too serious, I hope?"

"He's stable, but he'll need someone to look at his leg. Do you have a medic?"

"We have several options for you, yes."

"We've got one wounded too," Atin said. "But it's not life-threatening either."

"Well, we'll take a look at your people, don't worry. By the way, this is your welcoming party, Ash Jarvee."

Altis gestured to the young woman in the green flight suit standing beside him. She had auburn hair pulled back in a tight bun and bright green eyes.

"Please to meet you," Ash bobbed forward in a little bow, but her manner was very friendly, very casual, very un-Jedi despite the lightsaber dangling off her belt.

Altis's eyes drifted over the crowd. Unsurprisingly, they settled at Zey and Scout, standing awkwardly in the back.

Now that he had attention, and there was nothing he could do, Arligan Zey stepped forward. The rest of the crowd parted for him, and after a little hesitation, Scout followed in his wake.

For a moment Altis and Zey stood face-to-face, a study in contrast between two factions of the Jedi Order. They were both older men but they couldn't have seemed more dissimilar: Altis was disheveled and paunched, but his eyes were bright and his face was creased from easy smiles. Zey stood with his hands to his sides, his back straight like a soldier or some kind of royalty, but his eyes were tired and his face was sagging and grizzled.

Skirata stared at them, waiting to see who'd offer a hand first. To his surprise, it was Zey. Altis took it with both hands and shook.

"I'm always glad to help another Jedi," he said.

"I'm glad there are still some left," said Zey. "How many knights do you have here, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Oh, well, it's a little hard to keep track. People come and go and, well, ranks and positions are a little loose with us."

Zey nodded easily, like he'd expected and accepted it all. As he looked around the broad flight deck Altis sidestepped to get a better view of Scout.

She seemed to wilt under his eyes, but she said, "Hi. My name is Tallisabeth En- Just call me Scout."

"Welcome, Scout."

"We also have, ah, this is Maze." Zey waved a hand at the only clone not dressed from the neck down in *beskar'gam*. "He's a friend of mine."

The phrase gave Altis pause, but only for a moment. "Welcome, Maze. Will you be staying with us as well?"

"I'd like to keep with Zey for a while." The clone nodded.

Altis opened his mouth to say something, then stopped. Skirata looked over his shoulder to see Kina Ha stepped out from beneath *Cornucopia*. Her long body and neck had been bowed just to avoid scraping her head on the hull, but now she had straightened out to her impressive height.

She walked past the clones, right up to Altis, and stared down at him with that blank Kaminoan face. He craned his neck back to marvel at her with a stupid grin on his face.

"Incredible," Altis said. "Absolutely incredible."

"Thank you for sheltering us," she dipped her head in a little bow.

"Oh, the pleasure is all mine." Altis ran a hand over his scalp. "Goodness. Well, I have to say I'm very excited. I'm not even sure where to start."

"I'd like to get your docs, or healers, or whatever to look at my people," Skirata said.

"Yes, of course, I'll send for them right away. Then I'll find a place for us to talk."

Like everything else about Master Altis, and the ugly cobbled-together academy ship he'd named after an

equally ugly one from centuries before, his meeting room ended up being different from what we'd expected. On the top deck of *Chu'unthor* he'd installed a broad bubble of transparisteel some twenty meters in diameter. When looking upward it seemed like there was nothing between you and the sprawling stars, but when you looked down you found yourself surrounded by beautiful plants from all over the galaxy. Gentle streams tinkled around sculpted rock gardens and Altis had us sit down at a small arena made of four curved layers of stone steps.

I sat down next to *Kal'buir* while Jaing and Walon Vau sat on his other side. Maze, Zey, and Kina Ha sat a little bit away from us, while Scout and Doctor Uthan set down in the middle. Altis, meanwhile, lowered himself cross-legged onto the arena's little stage, like he was waiting for us, the audience, to direct his show.

"Well," Altis clapped his hands together, "I suppose we should figure out where we all go from here."

"That's a fact," Vau said. He seemed like the only one who wasn't taken in by our new safe haven. That wasn't surprising, and it was probably why *Kal'buir* kept him around; he stayed critical and keep everybody else sharp.

"As I've said before, anyone who wants to stay here is welcome." Altis scanned the crowd with his eyes. They seemed to linger on Scout and Uthan.

Kina Ha said, "I would like to take you up on your offer, Djinn. While I'm grateful for Mister Skirata's, ah, family for having me, their life is a little hectic for a being of my advanced years."

Kal'buir chuckled. "No problem. A Kaminoan isn't the easiest being to hide with, no offense."

"None taken," Kina Ha said smoothly.

"Master Zey? Maze?" Altis looked to them.

"We'll be splitting off from Skirata's people," Zey said. "We've burdened them enough."

Vau and Jaing gave curt nods, but I kept still.

"Would you like to stay here, Master Zey?" Altis asked, "Or would you prefer... a different setting?"

"I don't know," Zey said awkwardly. "I haven't been in the position to chose that sort of thing for a while."

Altis laughed easily. "I can imagine that. Well, there are other options. We have... allies. Safehouses, scattered across the galaxy. If you like this setting, there's one on Belsavis you might appreciate. It's not a far run from here."

"Belsavis?" *Kal'buir* frowned. "Never heard of it."

"It's an ice planet," Jaing said. The Null's eidetic memory was as good ever. "Has geothermal hot spots where its tectonic plates meet. Each one's a little mini-ecosystem in itself."

"My," Altis said, "That's impressive recall, young man."

"Runs in the family," Jaing shrugged. "You sure it's safe, though?"

"I have people there right now, making sure of that fact. It's run by So Plett, if he's familiar to you, Master Zey."

Zey looked thoughtful. "He's a Ho'din, isn't he? A botanist?"

"I think he prefers to call himself a gardener."

"I've heard of him. I don't think I ever met him."

"He was never one to hang around the Temple," Altis smiled a little.

If a jab was intended, Zey didn't react. "If his settlement on Belsavis is half as pretty as this, I wouldn't object to spending time there. Maze?"

"I'll go where you go," the clone said simply.

Kina Ha spoke up. "I believe I am familiar with this Master Plett, though it has been a long time... I would like to see him as well."

"Goodness," Altis chuckled, "I was hoping my new friends would stay around, but I guess I'm not so lucky."

His gaze settled on Scout and Uthan again. I felt sorry for them both; they'd lost their home and someone they cared about in the same day, and now they seemed estranged for everyone and everything, including each other.

Still, Uthan managed to say, “I think I'm going to respectfully decline, Master Altis. I think I'm needed elsewhere.”

Kal'buir raised an eyebrow. “Got plans, then?”

Uthan nodded grimly. “I started a job with Mij. I'd like to keep working on it. I know it won't be easy.”

“You want to find more clones and slow their aging,” I said.

“*Mij'ika* would have loved that,” *Kal'buir* said.

“I figured you might have the same plan, Kal.”

Vau shifted on his seat. “I'd like to remind everybody that Palps still wants to kill all of us. Staying *alive* is our main plan. We can only save others peoples' *shebs* once we've taken care of our own.”

Altis smiled thinly. “I believe you have a point. In fact, I've recently come upon some disturbing information. It seems the Empire has recently activated a new weapon of some kind, an automated space station this is, according to my sources, set to target Jedi encampments in this part of space.”

“Do you know where?”

“The last we heard it was stationed at Farstine, so it could be going after a number of locations in the Outer Rim, possibly even ones not connected with my people, and there are some of those left. I recently learned of a hidden temple on Arkinnea that was destroyed by the Empire. I hadn't even *heard* of it before it was targetted.”

“Is Belsavis vulnerable?” asked Maze.

“Possibly. It's a little way from Farstine, but I've warned Master Plett in any case.”

“Do your safehouses have the ability to evacuate on short notice?”

Altis gave a weak, noncommital shrug.

“Well, this place is mobile, and that's good,” Vau said, “But we have to keep moving too. Kal, the question for us is whether you want to keep all three ships together or skip around.”

"Splitting up would make it easier for us to find more clone deserters," Uthan said.

"There are still others back on Mandalore," Jaing pointed out. "I pinged some other *vode* back home. They know what we've got and they know they want it. The tricky part is going to be arranging it."

I glanced sidelong at *Kal'buir*. He'd gone quiet and was staring ahead in silent thought, but I knew what he was thinking. We'd slowed the aging process for most of his sons, and it would be dangerous to go around trying to heal more. If we turned ourselves into a mobile medical mercy service we'd draw the Imps onto our backs all the quicker. *Kal'buir* wanted to *ba'slan shev'la*, scatter and disappear, as soon as we got Niner and Darman home, rest of the galaxy be damned.

But as much as he loved his boys, he also knew other clones deserved real lives as much as his sons.

Suddenly he slapped his palms on the hard armor of his thighs and said, "We'll decide that later. Right now we need to figure out who goes and who stays."

"I would like to go to Belsavis, as I've said," Kina Ha spoke up.

"I would too," Zey said, and Maze nodded beside him.

Uthan looked at *Kal'buir*. "I'll stay with you, Kal, at least for now."

Scout stared at her hands, clasped white on her knees, and didn't say anything. Every one of us knew what was going through her mind and none of us, not even Vau, was willing to push her, even though we knew she'd have to be pushed soon.

Altis suddenly popped to his feet, breaking the pressure. "Well," he said, "We can make finals calls later. It will probably be a day or two before your wounded are back on their feet, Kal."

"Better than we could have done. Thank you."

"It's the least I could do. I know your people have been through an awful time."

"As have we all," Kina Ha said quietly.

Everyone could agree to that.

As the group started to break I hopped down the steps to Altis and said, "There's someone else I was wondering about. There's a woman I met, and my friend Etain before, called Callista."

"Ah!" Altis's eyes lit up. "She's on Belsavis now, as a matter of fact."

"I hope she's safe."

"As do I." Altis put a hand on my shoulder; it squeezed the hard plating of my *beskar'gam* but through the Force I could feel his open warmth.

"In dangerous times it's important to have friends, young man."

I smiled despite myself. "Dont worry, Djinn. I figured that one out a while ago."

When the signal came, Niner tried to act nonchalant. He pretended to examine something on the engineering console, then said, "I'm getting a flag on the engine temperature. It says the thrust injectors are starting to overheat. Might be some kind of problem with the coolant system. Rede, do you want to go take a look at it?"

The young clone glanced at the auxiliary console. "I'm not seeing any problems here, sir."

"It coming up on my board. Might be a malfunction on this end. Can you go check, just to be sure?"

"Of course, sir." Rede stood up, snapped a salute, and walked past Darman to the aft cabin.

"Okay," Niner said, "*Buy'ce* on."

He and Darman slid their helmets on. Niner flicked a switch on the communications console, routing the long-range transceiver to their helmet installations.

"Niner here," he said. "Are we safe to talk?"

"Should be good, Niner," one of his brothers said; probably Jaing or Mereel. "I added another layer of encryption."

"We only have a few minutes." There were a thousand things he wanted to ask, and just as many things he wanted to explain, but he knew Rede wouldn't be back there for long.

"I'll make it fast, then." Skirata's voice came on. "We're safe for now. We all got off Mandalore except for Jilka and Mij Gilamar."

Niner's gut sank. Gilimar had been *Cuy'val dar* and one of his father's closest friends. Even with his armor on he'd acted the part of the friendly country doctor, and he'd helped deliver Etain and Darman's son.

"*Buir*, we're so sorry about Gilamar. We-"

"Not your fault, son," Skirata said gruffly. "It was those Death Watch *shabuire* took him down, but he went out fighting."

"Are the Jedi with you too?" Darman interjected.

The pause seemed to last forever. Then Skirata said, "We're almost done with the Jedi, *Dar'ika*, I promise."

"Is Kad-"

"He's fine, Dar, Trust me. These Jedi aren't the baby-snatching sort anyway."

"Zey's with you." It was an accusation.

"He is now, but we're about to ship him off the Belsavis. The rest of them too. Then we can meet up again."

"I'm not going anywhere until my son's safe from those Jedi, *buir."*

"Trust me Dar, he will be, very soon."

"Where are you lads now?" the Null interjected.

"Heading to Farstine. The Five-oh-First has something planned."

There was another pause before Skirata said, "We might be heading into the same mess, but at least we'll be close by."

"*Buir*, it's just to two of us in this boat, plus Rede," said Niner. "He's a Spaarti clone. He was the one who called the garrison on Mandalore, not us. We had no idea he'd do it."

"I believe you, Niner, don't worry. Can you disable him?"

"Tell us where to meet you and we'll stun him and turn this boat around."

"Good. Stand by for now."

"*Buir*, we've got a shrinking window here. Melusar expects us at Farstine soon."

"I know. We'll try to keep you informed. We'll call you when we're ready. If you get to Farstine first, that's fine. We'll be close by and can figure out extraction some other way. Don't alert the Imps until you have to."

"Understood." Niner glanced at his console's chronometer. Rede had already been back there for close to two minutes and had probably already figured out the coolant system was fine. "Dar, can you go back and stall Rede? I just want a couple more minutes."

"Understood." Darman took off his helmet and slipped down the corridor.

"Dar's gone," Niner said. "What else, *buir*? Are you really getting free of the Jedi?"

"We are, honest. I know not bring Dar home until we do. Can you handle him until then, *ad'ika*?"

"I'll do my best."

"I know. It won't be long. Laseema and Ordo took some damage but they'll be fine once Altis patches 'em up."

"Altis," Niner breathed. "He's a hot commodity. We might be going after him next. Watch yourself, *buir*."

"I will. And in case you need something else to look forward to, we've got a special treat when we catch up."

"What treat?"

Skirata took a breath and said, "We found a way to halt your fast aging."

Niner couldn't move, couldn't think. something like a laugh rattled his chest.

"It's true, *ad'ika*," the Null, probably Jaing, said. "It was *Mij'ika*'s last gift. Fixed all us up right before the Imps came. Me, I feel twenty years younger."

"You're not even fifteen," Skirata reminded him.

"Exactly." Niner could practically hear Jaing's wolf-grin.

"Make sure to tell Darman," Skirata said. "Something else for him to look forward to."

"I will." Niner felt something heavy settle in his gut, killing the elation of a second ago. "Jaing, can I talk to *Kal'buir* alone for a sec?"

"It's *Mereel*, *ner vod*," the Null said angrily, "But whatever."

He thought he heard some clicking sound, then Skirata's voice. "Jaing's just messing with you, *ad'ika*."

There wasn't time for banter. "*Buir*, I'm worried about Darman."

Another long pause. "What do you mean?"

"What happened with Etain, and Kad, it's messed him up bad. And when he heard the Jedi were on Mandalore-"

"He freaked out. I know. But you can handle him."

"*Buir*, he really fell under Melusar's spell. You know, our captain, the guy who things it's his holy duty to hunt down Force-users."

"Niner, what do you think Dar's actually *done?"*

"I don't know. Maybe nothing."

"Do you think he sicced those Death Watch psychos on us?" Skirata's voice was deathly cold.

"No. He was as shocked as me when Rede made the call. Even more shocked, maybe."

"Then what, *ad'ika*?"

"I saw something on our comm logs. He made some secure call via his *buy'c*, untraceable, the same way we're talking now. He didn't call you, did he?"

"No. He didn't."

"Then who?"

"I should ask you that. Or better yet, ask him."

He didn't even know how to confront Darman. He didn't know what to accuse him of besides maybe talking to his own commanding officer in private.

"Niner, you're not just his brother, you're his sergeant. You have to take responsibility for him, especially since he's messed up in the head right now."

"I know, *buir*, I know."

"All of us, we've got one mission left, and that's putting this family back together. If you think he's going to compromise that mission, you have to take responsibility. Do you understand?"

Niner shuddered, alone and unseen. Skirata was his *buir*, his teacher, his guide, but he was also a hard man who did what had to be done no matter how ugly the deed might be.

"I'll do what I have to, *buir*. I won't let you down."

"I know you won't, son. Just take care of Darman. I want to see both you boys soon."

"I know, *buir*. I'll do everything I can."

"I love you, son. Skirata, out."

There was no beep, no clicking-off, just silence over the comlink and the rasping of Niner's heavy breathing inside his helmet. The light on the console winked off.

When he heard footsteps in the corridor he tugged his helmet off and turned to face the viewport, because he didn't trust his face right now. As he saw Darman's reflection in the transparisteel he remembered Skirata's last warning, and then he remembered the great news before that, and he didn't know whether to laugh or weep.

13

"Everyone once in a while, Kad'ika*, there are people who are true heroes, like the kind they show in holodramas. People who are brave, just, self-sacrificing, and all that fuzzy* osik*. You might never get to meet people like that, but they can affect your life just the same. Sometimes a couple heroes are all that it takes to stand between safety and oblivion."*

The tunnels of Plett's Well went deep into the mountains, and it took many hours for Margolis to show Callista and Geith all of its many chambers and secret passages. When Callista asked how they kept adventurous children from getting lost in the underground maze, Margolis had explained that Master Plett had used the Force to imbue certain areas with sensations of fear. Children who went too deep down certain tunnels would be struck with the sensation that there about to be attacked by klecks or other beasts and would turn tail and head for safer ground.

Callista was older and stronger in the Force than a collection of children, and under Master Altis she'd learned novel ways of using the Force to interact with non-living objects. She was in fact his best student in that regard, probably better than Djinn himself. Growing up, she'd learned to trace electric pulses that passed between the fish and whales in Chad's oceans, and her ability to sense that raw energy, sometimes even manipulate it with

the Force, had given her a special sensitivity for technology as well.

Despite all her knowledge and experience, despite knowing how and why Plett infused the black rock of the tunnels with lingering Force-phantoms, she still felt a creeping sense of dread that lingered even after they'd left the tunnels and gone back up to the hot, damp gardens on the planet's surface. Geith seemed to be feeling something similar, though with typical bravado he pretended he wasn't and didn't speak of it aloud.

All that dread became suddenly justified when they received the message from Master Altis. It came through *Wookiee Gunner*'s communications system and they read his summary in the freighter's cockpit with quiet dread before going back out to Plett's home to tell him the news.

"There's no way to be certain where this thing is going," Geith told the old Ho'din as he sat on a bench, staring down at a row of potted plants. "We need to send out scouting parties. See if we can find its location."

"We're a good way from Farstine," Margolis said. She hugged herself and took nervous steps back and forth in front of Plett's bench.

"We're not that far either," Callista said. "Master Altis can move *Chu'unthor* wherever he wants on short notice. You're not that lucky. You need to take precautions against that… thing."

Callista didn't know what else to call it. From the summary Master Altis had received from Hallena, it sounded like nothing ever put in service before.

"Master Plett, how many people do we have here total?"

"Twenty-seven, counting yourselves and Istar's kids," Margolis answered for him.

"We can squeeze them onto *Wookie Gunner*, barely," Geith said, "Do you have any more ships?"

"Nothing as big as your freighter," Margolis continued to answer for Plett while the old Ho'din stared at his plants. "We have some Y-wings and a blastboat. We use them

sometimes for milk runs for other parts of the planet, or nearby systems."

"I can fly Y-wings," Geith said. "Do you have one-seaters or two?"

"Both."

He looked at Callista. "What do you say we take a Y-wing on a scouting mission? We'll leave *Wookiee Gunner* here in case they need to get out on short-notice."

"I'm okay with that, but where do we scout? There's a lot of empty space between here and Farstine."

"This thing is supposed to be carved out of an asteroid, right? If that thing's lying somewhere, hiding out, it's going to be where there's lots of asteroids."

"Tons of systems have asteroid belts. That doesn't narrow things down."

Master Plett picked up his head and said, "The Moonflower Nebula."

Geith frowned. "Never heard of it. Is it close by?"

Plett nodded. "It is a beautiful formation of stellar gasses. Those same gasses scramble the sensors of any approaching ship. The nebula is also filled with drifting planetoids."

"So in others words, it's the perfect place to hide."

"If they're coming near Belsavis, yes."

Their course seemed suddenly set. Callista blew out a long breath and said, "Our friend Hallena passed on the IFF code the ship's fighters are using. It's a lot more complex than usual codes, probably because the asteroid is run by an artificial intelligence. We might be able to rig the Y-wing's comm systems to transmit the same signal."

"It's worth a shot," Geith said. "I'll need to take a look at your ship and see if I can do the mods."

"Do not be too confident," Plett warned. "The enemy battlestation may be unmanned but there is no reason to think you can disarm it all by yourselves."

"We know, Master," said Geith. "If we run into it we'll send a signal to you and Master Altis right away, so you'll know to evacuate."

"You should be ready to pull out on short notice anyway." Callista looked to Margolis. "You still remember how to fly *Gunner*?"

"As long as I don't have to do anything fancy with it."

"You might," Geith warned. "Master Plett, I recommend you gather all the children and stand by until we scout the nebula."

Plett nodded. "We will do that."

"There's also the possibility we won't come back," Callista said. She knew Geith would act brave and tough so she cut him off before he started. "Master Plett, in that Y-wing, how long will it take us to reach the nebula?"

The Ho'din considered. "Perhaps four hours."

"If you don't get a signal from us within six hours of our departure, prep for evacuation. And send Master Altis a signal too."

"Well do it," Margolis nodded gravely. She was getting a wet look in her eyes, like she was taking a last hard look at her friends.

"That's not Plan A though," Geith said. "Plan A is that we scout the Moonflower and get out fast. We should be able to send a warning once we clear the nebula, if not sooner."

"Master Plett," asked Callista, "Does anyone else on this planet know you're here? Are there any other settlements?"

"There are Mluki we've traded with, but no off-worlders."

"The Empire might still be able to get information out of them," Callista said delicately.

Wiping beings' memories was controversial for the Jedi, even Altis's generally tolerant bunch, and she didn't want to suggest it out loud.

"I will take precautions," Plett said simply, and Callista knew they'd have to trust him at that.

Geith put a hand on her arm. "Come on, Callie. We should take a look at that Y-wing."

"I'll show it to you," Margolis said. "We have a hangar that opens out onto the glacier. There's a lot of tunnels to get through but I'll guide you."

As Margolis led them into the catacombs Geith asked, "Where are Roganda and Ismaren? We should probably talk to them before we head out."

"Oh, of course!" Margolis said. "I bet Ustu took them to the den with the other kids. Follow me."

Margolis led them down a series of winding corridors, and Callista wondered, not for the first time, how long it had taken her friend to memorize the layout of so many underground pathways that all looked so alike.

In the end, the detour only took a few minutes. A cluster of a dozen children were gathered in a large cave with a high domed roof from which a series of glowglobes were suspended, providing almost day-like illumination on clusters of tall plants and a smoothed stone floor.

The children were of various species; mostly human but some Togruta, a Diamalan, an Ithorian, and even a Wookiee. The ages for the alien younglings were hard to measure but the humans seemed to range from four years old to eleven or twelve. Most were playing with toys designed for Force-users while tall Ustu towered above them, looking on impassively.

Lagan and Roganda stood to one side, watching the others play but not joining in. Callista wasn't surprised. Even among the kids on *Chu'unthor* the Ismarens made friends slowly, and as in most things, Roganda seemed to follow her big brother's lead. Part of the reason they'd chosen to take the Ismarens to Belsavis was to see if even their most reticent younglings would mesh with the ones from Yoda's temple.

Well, they didn't seem to be fighting with the other kids, so Callista decided it was a good enough start.

Lagan and Roganda both looked glad to see familiar faces. Geith, always better with the kids, crouched in front of them while Callista looked on.

"Callie and I are going to be running an errand," he told them, "But we'll be back soon, don't worry. Until then, do everything Ustu and Margolis tell you to, okay? Stay with the other kids."

"Where are you going?" Lagan asked while Roganda seemed to sulk behind his shoulder.

"Not far, don't worry," Callista said.

"Have you been getting along with the others?" Geith asked.

Roganda made a face. Lagan said, "They're a little… *weird*."

To his credit, Geith didn't laugh. "What's weird about them?"

"They just *are*. They don't play in groups, they just sit around and fiddle with those toys."

"Well, do they share?"

Lagan shrugged.

"Have you *asked* them to share?"

He shrugged again, weaker than before.

"Listen, I know they seem a little weird because they were brought up different than you, but they still use the Force. You two have a lot more in common than you think." He put one hand on Lagan's shoulder and one on Roganda's. "Just try and be friendly, both of you. I bet you'll get along just fine."

The kids nodded dutifully; it was probably the best they were going to get out of them.

After that Margolis led them through more winding black tunnels, back toward the hangar. Callista sidled next to Geith and said, "My, my, what happened to the young firebrand I fell in love with?"

"The galaxy changed," he said without humor. "We're all in this together now."

Callista nodded in the dark. There was nothing else to say.

Gilad Pellaeon understood that in time of war (or whatever the current situation was) the commander of a

capital ship had to expect the unexpected. His first ship, *Leveler*, had undergone a series of modifications in which experimental weapons technology was installed, and while this had been confusing at first, those modifications had ultimately creating a superior fighting ship.

When they'd changed *Leveler* they'd at least bothered to brief him on what they were doing. As it was, when Pellaeon's shuttle departed Farstine's command station and drifted into *Valediction*'s main hangar bay, he was stunned to see construction crews frantically working on some installation that took up half the flight deck.

Pellaeon was a professional, so he politely but firmly told the man beside him, "I was told the modifications to *Valediction* would be swift and minor."

Commodore Zaarin, tapping thick fingers on the armrest of his chair, said, "According to the construction chief's reports they will be finished in less than ten hours."

"In the future, Commodore, I would appreciate copies of those reports being routed to me."

"I will arrange it," Zaarin nodded easily.

Behind him the silent, dark-skinned Darys woman looked out of the side viewport with an air of dull half-interest.

Pellaeon couldn't take his eyes off the monstrous mess they'd made of his ship, his *brand new* ship. The destroyer's existing wing of Eta-2 and ARC fighters were crammed to the port side of the flight deck so tight they had no room to take off, while the starboard bulkhead had been covered with scaffold-like racks into which were locked several dozen new starfighters with spherical cockpits and ungainly six-sided solar array panels jutting out to either side.

There was, to his relief, enough space for the shuttle to put down on the edge of the construction zone. From the cockpit Pellaeon could see Vernedet and half a squad of clone troopers waiting for them. When the shuttle settled on the flight deck Pellaeon rose first and led his two companions down the landing ramp.

"Captain, welcome back," Vernedet spoke hurriedly, like he was trying to reign in panic. "The construction crews arrived almost as soon as you docked at the station, sir. I double-checked with sector and command and they said this was by Admiral Grant's direct orders."

"It's all right, Lieutenant," Pellaeon held up a hand and gave him a we'll-talk-later look. "These are the guests who will be overseeing our mission, Commodore Demetrius Zaarin of Starfighter Command and Miss Ameesa Darys of the Inquisitorius."

He saw Vernedet's eyes widen. Like many of the changes being made in this new Empire, the Inquisitorius was something heard of in rumors but never in official pronouncements. The destruction of the treasonous Jedi Order was no secret, but the creation of a smaller organization of Force-users, directly loyal to the new Emperor, was something only talked about in whispers. Pellaeon himself had never really believed it until Darys, dark and cryptic, had shown up in front of him.

At another time this would have been distressing, but right now he was more worried about Zaarin's surprise. Apparently Vernedet was too; he shifted his attention to the Commodore and asked, "Will your new fighters be taking the lead on our new mission, sir?"

Pellaeon cleared his throat. "Our mission is actually going to be an escort one, as I understand it."

"I see, sir," Vernedet said blankly, but questions were all over his face.

"Don't worry, Lieutenant," Zaarin said cheeringly, "We won't be putting your vessel in any immediate danger. Not if Mr. Keldor's creation is trustworthy, at least."

Grant had explained that Ohran Keldor, the *Eye*'s designer, was apparently aboard the battlemoon with its skeleton crew in the Moonflower Nebula. Pellaeon told his first officer, "We'll be rendezvousing with Keldor and his battlemoon once we have an exact location of the target. Long-range probes are currently combing the area."

That didn't answer many of the questions on Vernedet's face. "So our timetable is quite, ah, flexible sir?"

"For the moment, yes. I understand these modifications to the flight deck will take another ten hours?"

"That's what I've been told sir."

At least someone on his ship knew what was going on. Pellaeon looked back at Zaarin and Darys. "If you please, our guards will show you to your quarters."

"Gladly." Zaarin nodded to the clones. "Take us there."

The four men in white armor snapped formal salutes, then turned and marched forward the far exit. Zaarin and Darys followed behind them; the woman stared right ahead of her but Zaarin watched the installation of his prized creations with a smile creasing his craggy face.

Pellaeon waited until both of them had disappeared into the lift tube before he released a long, long sigh.

Vernedet asked, "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Granted."

"Gil, what the hell is going on here? First that, that *thing* shows up in orbit, and then-"

"We're going Jedi hunting," Pellaeon interjected.

Vernedet's face fell. "Is that what the battlemoon thing is, sir? A Jedi killer?"

"It's a massive automated weapons platform, and as soon as their intel figures out where the Jedi safehouse is, they're going to pound it to slag. That battlemoon's never been tested before. *Valediction* and *Salvation* are just insurance in case it messes up."

Vernedet tried and failed to restrain his scowl. "Gil, what about Syne? What about that new fleet?"

"Those aren't our concern right now. This mission is."

"I don't like this. I don't like any of it."

"Neither do I, but we have our orders."

"Who are these new visitors, really? Is Zaarin some kind of starfighter designer?"

"Something like that. I believe those new contraptions are his brainchildren. Frankly, despite the mess they're

making in my hangar, I trust them more than Keldor's battlemoon."

"And that woman, Darys?"

"She's only said a few words since we've met in Grant's office. I assume she's here to hunt Jedi, but I don't know anything more than that. I wish I did."

"Gil, you've served with Jedi before. Can they… sense what we're thinking?"

"As in read our thoughts? I don't think so, but I can't say anything for certain. These Inquisitors…"

"They say they're like Jedi, but *meaner*."

"Apparently the Emperor thinks he can control them. At the least he thinks he can use them against the real Jedi."

Vernedet shuddered slightly. "Zaarin I don't mind, but the Force-user creeps me out, Gil."

"From what I could tell, Mynar, even *Grant* got 'creeped out,' as you poetically put it."

"Well, that makes me feel better. A little."

Pellaeon looked over to the strange new fighters in their strange new mounting system. "Mynar, have you met the construction crew chief yet?"

"I have sir."

"Is he working up there now?"

"I believe he is."

"Then introduce me to him. I need to take control of my ship back."

"With pleasure, sir."

It wouldn't be enough, but for now, it was the best he could do.

Flying into the Moonflower Nebula was like diving into an ocean, only instead of sinking through Chad's blue-green waters they were submerging themselves in invisible radiation spreading out from whorls of red, pink, and violet gasses left over from some ancient supernova. Callista was in the Y-wing's rear-facing back seat, which meant that instead of watching the nebula swell before them and fill

their vision the colors instead reached around from the sides of the cockpit until it gradually enveloped everything, even the twinkling of far distant stars.

When you dove deep into the ocean you at least had the rippling light of the sun to show you the way up. Once they were swallowed up by the nebula it felt like there was no way out.

Callista tried not to be discomfited by the loss of direction. It didn't help that Geith was the one piloting, though she knew he was far better at snubfighters than her. She focused her attention on the Y-wing's scanners, though as predicted, all the gases and radiation mucked them up effectively.

"How's it going, Geith?" she asked. "See any big floating rocks that might also be automated battle stations?"

"Yep, it's right next to Exar Kun's dreadnaught."

Sith weren't anything to joke about lately, so she asked, "Do you have visual on anything besides nebula gasses?"

"Well, I've spotted something up ahead. Looks to be some kind of space rocks."

"Any idea on the size?"

"Hold on, I'm calibrating visuals sensors. Those should still work. Looks like… maybe thirty or forty. Range from planetoid-size to… a lot smaller."

"Hallena says to look for something almost twenty kilometers long and about half as wide."

"I know, I am. Is that IFF transmitter working?"

"Putting it up now," Callista turned her attention to the communications console.

Geith seemed confident that the signal would broadcast the IFF algorithm correctly. He also insisted that the nebula's radiation wouldn't have an effect. She was less certain on both counts but knew there was no point in arguing. It would work or it wouldn't.

"Taking us close to those asteroids now," Geith said, and she felt the Y-wing bank to port.

She strained in her cockpit for a better look but she couldn't turn far enough for a good view. "Do you see anything?"

"I see rocks. Big rocks."

"Anything that's *not* a rock? Anything artificial?"

"Just rocks. Wait, I see another cluster of planetoids past this one. More of them, too. They look smaller."

"Double-check these ones. Make sure there's nothing here."

"Will do."

The Y-wing went through several turns, first starboard, then port, then starboard again. Callista watched as mammoth chunks of space rock drifted past. As Geith had said, they were rocks, nothing more and nothing less.

"Heading for the second cluster now," he said. "There's going to be more this time so keep your eyes peeled."

"Sure. I don't have anything else to do back here."

"Well, if that IFF signal doesn't work you're going to have to take the guns."

"Lovely. I thought this thing was wholly automated."

"It also has a fighter wing, remember? Some new model or something?"

Callista recalled it from Hallena's report. The description had been vague and unencouraging. Callista was an average shot at best and these new fighters were supposed to be especially nimble.

She studied the weapons controls for a few minutes before Geith announced, "Okay, taking us in. Start looking, Callie."

Space rocks began to roll past them. They varied drastically in size but they drifted far enough apart that Geith had an easy time piloting. Callista was scanning a cluster of asteroids off their port side when she spotted something.

"Do you see that?" she said, "Off to port. Say… Eight o'clock."

"Your eight or my eight?"

"Yours. I thought I saw something artificial on one of those rocks. Something *smooth*, anyway."

Geith banked the Y-wing in a sharp turn. The asteroid fell out of Callista's sight.

"What have we got?" she asked.

"You're right, I definitely see something. Looks like… communications towers, maybe. And there are regular openings in the rock, like hangar bays. Do you think that's it?"

"What else is it going to be?"

"Point taken." Geith's voice quavered a little. "Cross your fingers. I'm taking us in."

"Fingers crossed," she said as she wrapped both hands around the gun turret's control yoke.

"Callie, this is definitely it. Hangars, command towers, turoblaser turrets, the works."

"Are we within range of the turrets?"

"I don't know. I think so."

"Well, they're not shooting at us yet."

"I noticed. Should we send a signal to Djinn and Master Plett?"

"It won't get through, will it?"

"Wouldn't hurt to try." Callista relaxed her grip on the gun controls and, praying those turbos wouldn't start firing, switched her attention to the comm system. It took her only a moment to send out the pre-programmed message giving their current coordinates and confirmation that they'd encountered the asteroid before it could attack Belsavis.

She had no idea if the message went through. She could only trust that it had.

"I'm taking us in closer," Geith said. "Hold on tight, Callie."

"I'm not going anywhere." She switched her attention and her hands back to the gun controls.

Her stomach jumped toward her throat as Geith executed a sharp dive. Suddenly the rugged rock surface of the asteroid was running fast beneath them. Callista watched

as heavy turbolaser towers and smaller anti-starfighter turrets whipped past. Their still gun-barrels were all pointed straight up toward the red and violet gas-clouds.

"Oh, thank the Force," she breathed. "The signal works."

"Thank Hallena."

"Thank *you*, Mister Comm-wizard."

"Hey, you're the one who can talk to machines."

"Yeah, well, you're the one who-"

"Wait! I see something!"

"What?" She tried and failed again to get a better look ahead.

"Oh, oh, Sithspawn, we've got incoming."

"What incoming? Geith?"

The Y-wing suddenly wrenched her upward. Her head nearly smacked against the cockpit frame as the Y-wing soared toward the nebular gasses. Before she could ask what was happened a hail of green laserfire buffeted the ship and scattered on their shields.

"What was that? Fighters?" Some part of her knew that if those had been turbolasers they'd be dead already.

"Three o'clock. Get those guns up, Callie!"

She gripped the control yoke for the gun turret in both hands and swiveled it to starboard. She spotted four strange craft, spheres flanked by perpendicular flat panels, silhouetted against the red and violet gasses. They spewed another volley of green laser blasts that Geith threw them into crazy contortions to avoid.

"Hit them! Hit them!" He said.

"I can't shoot if you don't hold the ship still!"

"If I hold still we're dead."

As flight of starfighters swung behind the Y-wing. They were clearly faster and more agile than the Jedi's craft, and Callista pumped several volleys of red laser blasts from the Y-wing's turret gun. One lucky shot caught a fighter in its spherical cockpit, and to her surprise the ship vanished in a sudden burst of flame.

"Did you see that?" she said. "They don't have any shields!"

"Good! Kill another!"

His words made Callista hesitate for half a second; they'd spent most of the war fighting Sep battle droids but this pilot was probably a sentient. He could have been a clone but even that wouldn't have made a difference; he'd still be a thinking, feeling being.

The three fighters pummeled their shields with another volley and her doubts disappeared. She pumped another series of laser blasts at them, but this time the fighters broke formation and nimbly dodged her attacks.

"They're flying circles around us, Geith!" she said.

"I know, and they've got friends! Two more flights."

Callista swore as four more fighters veered onto their tail. They fired more laser blasts, some of which broke through shields and tore fiery holes in the Y-wing's port engine.

"Geith, we're hit!"

"I know, I know! Shutting down engine."

The fires went out, and so did the thrust from the port nacelle. "We're going to be sitting Hutts now."

"Hold on. I'm heading for the asteroid."

"You're *what*?"

"We can't outrun them but the turbos still don't see us. We're going to have to land."

The thought of them being stranded on a vast enemy station was horrifying but death was even worse. Before Callista could say anything else, Geith threw the ship into another series of crazy turns. Even with one engine he managed to corkscrew the Y-wing into steep dive, right toward the open mouth of a hangar bay. More fighters settled on their tail, raining a hail of green plasmsa that tore through their shields and shredded a portion of the cockpit pod.

More lasers starting whipping past their ship, now from a different direction. Geith said, "Those gun turrets are coming online!"

"They see us?"

"We must've lost the signal. I'm taking us in!" Geith said, "Hold on!"

"Geith, do they have shields up?"

"Sensors don't show."

"*Geith*!"

He gunned the accelerator. The fighters veered off to avoid a collision but their Y-wing speared forward, right into the station's open mouth.

The bright borders of the hangar bay jumped into Callista's vision. Then Geith killed the engine and fired the reverse directional repulsors at full power. The whiplash was too much. Her vision swam for a second before everything went black.

14

"I want you to remember something very important, Kad'ika*. When the time came I had to make a choice. I've always tried to do what I thought was right, and that's what I did then. And I can't tell you how sorry I am."*

We were with Ordo in *Chu'unthor*'s sick bay when we heard. I was with Besany and the rest of the Nulls, and Ordo's able-bodied brothers had been giving him a hard time and even putting a smile on his sour face. Then *Kal'buir* walked in with a stony expression and asked for the Nulls and me to step outside.

"Something wrong, *buir*?" Besany asked.

"Don't worry about it, *Bes'ika*," he tried and failed to force a smile. Ordo and Besany clearly knew something was up but Ordo wasn't in the shape to protest and Besany wasn't going to leave his side, so they stayed in the sick bay and watched *Kal'buir* lead the rest of us out.

We followed him down the clean white corridors of Altis' shockingly well-stocked medical wing until we reached the big storage warehouse where Altis was waiting for us with a couple of his apprentices; Ash Jarvee again and a masked Kel Dor named Nor Vald we'd briefly met in the medical wing. Fi was there, and so was Corr. Maze and Zey sat against a heavy crate in one corner while Vau stood in the opposite side, arms crossed over his black-armored chest, scowling while Lord Mird crouched at his side with its

head held high and alert. Finally, Kina Ha was standing behind Altis and his people, silent and towering.

I could see it on everyone's faces and feel the grim mood in the Force. It was a very different meeting than our last one in the garden. I knew something dire had happened and steeled myself for the worst.

Altis came right out with it. “The Empire has found our safehouse on Belsavis.”

“Oh, *shab*,” Kom'rk said. *Kal'buir* and the others in the room didn't look surprised; Altis had already told them.

“Have they attacked yet?” I asked.

“Two of my people intercepted their, ah, battlestation in the Moonflower Nebula. We got their signal less than thirty minutes ago,” Altis said. “We've heard nothing from them since. We have to assume they've been killed.”

My heart sunk into my gut. I'd only met Callista briefly but I'd taken an instant liking to her. I asked, “How many people do you have on Belsavis? Can you get them out?”

“There are over twenty people in the settlement. I'm not sure what kind of transportation Master Plett has, or what defenses. I'm going to send Ash and Nor Vald to evacuate as soon as possible.”

He left his request unspoken, but it rippled through the room. Lord Mird gave a low, growling noise but Zey placed a hand on the lightsaber at his belt. No one had to question what he would do.

Ash spoke up. “Almost all the beings in Plett's Well are children.”

It fell like a grim pronouncement over the entire room. I could see the conflicting priorities on *Kal'buir*'s face. Vau, arms still crossed forbiddingly over his chest, said, “I'm sorry, but this isn't our fight.”

“I understand that,” said Altis, “But my people, even my best Jedi, aren't soldiers.”

“I'll go,” Maze said behind Zey.

That didn't surprise me but it showed on my old master's face. He looked back at Maze like he wanted to say

something, but he kept his mouth shut. He didn't say anything to me either, didn't even look at me, and maybe if he had, it would have made all the difference.

If he had straight-up asked me to come with him, I would have said no. My lingering resentment against the Order and my contrarian instincts would have kicked in and I'd have sided with Vau in telling him we've had enough fighting and sorry, but those helpless little kids were going to have to fend for themselves against an overwhelming Imperial onslaught because we're Mandos and you're Jedi and we've already mingled too much for anybody's comfort.

But I didn't say that. No one pressured me. No one even looked at me; *Kal'buir* was lost in a silent struggle with his conscience, Vau and Mird were adamant, the clones were looking at their *buir* for guidance, and Kina Ha seemed to be hovering aloof above the crowd, not that anybody expected her to pick up a lightsaber anyway.

Because no one was prodding me or pressuring me, I could look within myself and decide. I told myself that it wasn't about being Mandalorian or Jedi, it was about being able to live with myself. It was about not letting twenty innocent children get slaughtered by the Empire.

"I'm going to help them," I said, and placed a hand on my belt above my lightsaber. "*Kal'buir*, if you'll let me, I want to take *Aay'han*. It's probably quicker and better armed than anything Altis has."

The room fell silent and suddenly everyone looked at me. *Kal'buir* stared at me from across the room and I felt surprise to see none of his face. He nodded, a little sadly, and said, "She's all yours, *Bard'ika*."

"Thank you, *buir*." My mouth had suddenly gone dry. "I'll get her back for you, I promise."

Then the surprises started coming. Kom'rk said, "We'll take the Aggressor and back you up, *Bard'ika.* She's got way more punch than *Aay'han.*"

I hadn't expected that. I hadn't even wanted it. I thought I'd made that decision as myself, but I forgot for that

moment that I was Skirata's son; I had a family, no matter what, and we were in this together.

I wagged my head back and forth. “No, no, it's okay. I'll just take *Aay'han* with the Jedi-”

“Someone has to watch your *shebs, Bard'ika*,” Prudii said. A'den nodded behind him.

“I want come too,” Corr spoke up. He'd been more quiet than normal since Jilka died and his voice then was full of pent-up anger. “I owe the Imps something fierce right now.”

“You might be fighting against your own brothers!” I told them, “They might send more clones to Belsavis!”

That made them hesitate, but Corr said, “Clones went against us at Kyrimorut. They go around shooting women and kids who can't fight back, they're no *vode* of mine.”

The others clones started to nod. I felt like everything was spinning out of control and looked to *Kal'buir*. “Nobody has to come with me. Somebody has to stay here and take care of Ordo and Laseema and-”

“They're right son,” he said easily, like I'd lifted a heavy weight from his shoulders. “We'll stay with you, watch your back.”

“No, *buir*, he's right,” Mereel shook his head. “Somebody had to stay with *Ord'ika* and the rest. Plus, somebody might need to contact Niner and Dar. Jaing, you should stay too.”

“What, and leave the fun to the rest of you?” Jaing laughed, but it didn't hide the concern on his face.

“We have no idea what we're facing,” Altis said softly. “Frankly, we need any resources we might get, though I understand we have to protect *Chu'unthor* too. That's why I'll be staying here.”

“*Kom'ika* and I can take Aggressor and keep your skies clear,” A'den said. “Everybody else can fit into *Aay'han* with plenty room to spare.”

“If we're going to decide something,” Zey said, “We need to decide *now*. We may already be too late.”

"You've all gone *shabla mir'osik*," Vau sneered from his forgotten corner of the room. He pushed off his crate, leaving Mird'alan behind, and stalked up to *Kal'buir* with balled fists. Prudii tried to intercept him but he shoved the clone two steps back and grabbed *Kal'buir*'s armor by the shoulder plates.

"This isn't our fight, *di'kut*!" he practically yelled in the man's face, "Leave the *shabla jetii* to the mess they've made and let's get out of here!"

"Vau, they're *kids*," Prudii said angrily.

"Yeah, kids today, saber-swinging freaks tomorrow," Vau snarled. "Kal, you've gone *shabla* soft. If you don't know who the enemy is-"

"The enemy's the *Empire*, Walon," *Kal'buir* said. His voice was flat and tight with anger. I couldn't see his face, but something in it made Vau let go of his shoulders and stagger a step back.

"This is a mistake, Kal," he insisted.

"You know, Ny said something to me a little while back. She said if you can't do something smart, do something right." *Kal'buir* looked back at me. "I trust *Bard'ika*. I trust all my sons."

Our eyes held. I couldn't doubt his words; at that moment I even stopped doubting myself.

It was Ash Jarvee who broke the silence. "If we're taking *Aay'han,* let's get it prepped. We need to get to Belsavis *fast*."

"Agreed," Fi patted me on the shoulder. "Come on, *Bard'ika*, let's do it."

I stared at him; he was in better shape than anytime in the past year but he was still nowhere near the fighting fit Corr and the Nulls were in. Sensing my question, he smiled a little and said, "Don't worry, I'll stay in the cockpit. Keep her warm for you."

"Fi, you don't have to. You don't owe me anything."

His mouth slanted a little in the wry easy smile of the Fi I'd first met a long time before. "Let's get going, *Bard'ika*."

Kom'rk marched up behind me and gave me a playful slap on the head. "*Oya*, boys. I'll get the Aggressor ready."

"Thank you," I said weakly, but by then most of them were already heading for the hangar. I looked back at the others still in the room: Altis and his Jedi, Kina Ha, Vau scowling in his corner, *Kal'buir* slightly damp in the eyes. Zey finally looked at me dead-on then, and his minute nod expressed gratitude beyond words.

Then I turned and followed my brothers back to the hangar. *Aay'han* and the Aggressor hadn't taken any real damage during the flight from Mandalore, so the main checks were to make sure all the weapons were loaded and calibrated. Mereel and Fi were in the cockpit and I was walking beneath the hull and giving the laser cannons a visual check when I saw Atin walking across the deck in full armor, helmet tucked under his arm.

I stopped beneath the wing and shook my head. "*At'ika*, don't. Stay here with Laseema. She needs you."

"The docs are taking care of her," he said, "I'm coming with my *vode*."

"We can take care of ourselves. Me, three Jedi, and seven commandos. That's more than enough."

"You don't know that, *Bard'ika*." He shook his head.

I knew deep down that I wasn't going to change his mind, just like I couldn't change anyone else's, but I knew I had to try.

"Atin, what about your *other* brothers? Darman and Niner might need help. You should stay with Jaing and *Kal'buir*. Don't you want to see the Omegas back together?"

"Can't do that if Fi or Corr get hurt. I'm coming."

I should have argued harder. I should have put my foot down at the very start and said I was going with Zey and nobody else was going to come after me, but even that probably wouldn't have made a difference in the end. Nothing's more stubborn than a Skirata.

That was when Corr popped halfway down the landing deck and said, “Hey, Atin, you coming?”

“Somebody's got to watch your back,” Atin called up merrily.

Corr grinned and ducked back into the freighter. Atin followed. As I watched his boots pound up the ramp and disappear, I prayed he'd given Laseema a loving goodbye. Looking back, I don't know if I was simply nervous, or if the Force was speaking to me, giving me some presentiment of the disaster ahead.

But I tried to do what was right, *Kad'ika*. I couldn't let those children die.

I hope you'll forgive me, one day.

Maze stood over Ordo's bed. The Null was laying there with his eyes closed. The IV tube into his arm dripped steady fluid and his heartrate monitor beeped regularly. Besany had told him that Ordo had been given some sedatives as part of the surgery on his leg but he supposedly had come out of them hours ago. Maze looked down on a man seemingly deep in comfortable sleep, afraid of doing something that would rouse him from necessary rest.

He didn't know what he wanted to say anyway.

As he stared at Ordo's face he saw the slight twitch on his forehead and the slight creaking open of an eyelid. Then Ordo said, “Don't you have someplace else to be?”

Maze's head jerked forward in a nod. “We leave in a couple minutes.”

“If you hadn't shot me I'd be going with you and my *vode*.”

“I know. I'm sorry.”

Ordo's second eyelid cracked open and he seemed to be giving Maze and sly sideways glance, but his lips were flat and mirthless.

“You know,” he said, “In a day or two I'll be up on my feet, kicking *shebs* again.”

"I look forward to seeing that," Maze said honestly.

"Oh yeah. Guess your bolt-hole at Belsavis just got busted. Where you gonna go now?"

"I don't know. We haven't talked about it. We'll probably stay with Altis."

"Long as he and Zey and stomach can each other."

Maze allowed a slight smile. "Something like that."

Ordo held a hand up, palm open. Maze reached out and clasped it. Ordo could still squeeze hard.

"Kick some Imp *shebs* for me," he said, "And keep my brothers safe."

"I'll do that."

"You'd better."

Ordo pulled his hand away, ending the conversation. Maze turned and headed for the exit, feeling light on his feet for reasons he couldn't put into words.

He was halfway down the corridor to the hangar bay when he saw Zey standing in the middle of the white hallway. Black plasteel armor had been strapped over his ragged tunic: breastplate, shoulders, forearms, thighs. If not for the lightsaber at his belt he wouldn't have looked like a Jedi Master at all.

When Maze got close Zey stood his ground and blocked his path. Maze stood eye-to-eye with the man and said, "Is there a problem?"

"You don't need to do this, Maze."

"Somebody has to save those kids."

"I have Bardan, Skirata's men, and two more Jedi. I don't need you."

"With all due respect, you're not my commanding officer anymore. You can't order me to stay here."

Zey's hard expression wilted. "Maze, you just got a whole new life. You don't have to risk it for my sake."

And that was it, right there, something Skirata's boys would never understand with their slavish devotion to their father and their pathetic obsession with Mandalorian

machismo, as if that would fill the hole their Kaminoan makers had left inside them.

Maze didn't need puffed-up warrior traditions to full the hole. He just needed one thing to believe in. It had been the Chancellor first, then the Republic's laws, then the nebulous will of its people, but they'd proven untrustworthy, one after another.

Zey he could believe in. Sometimes one friend was all you needed.

"They're waiting for us," he said. "Let's go save those kids."

Zey held his gaze for a moment, then nodded. He turned, and Maze followed him down the hall.

For a few months Scout had started to feel like a true member of the community at Kyrimorut. Now she was an outsider, and she knew she'd never belong again; at least, not with them.

Still, she felt she had to be there to see them off. She joined the odd assembly on the flight deck that gathered around *Aay'han* and the Aggressor. She stood between Uthan and Kina Ha; to her right were Besany, Skirata, Ny, and Ruusaan; to her left were Altis, Jaing, and Laseema, balanced awkwardly between a pair of crutches. As Scout watched *Aay'han* pull up its landing deck, she felt something knock into her legs. She didn't have to look down to know it was Lord Mirdalan, and as she bent over to scratch between the strill's ears she looked back to see Walon Vau scowling from the far edge of the deck.

The Aggressor fighter rose into the air first. It nimbly spun its nose toward the hangar's open mouth, then kicked its engines in and jumped through the gap. Then *Aay'han* rose on its repulsors, slow and steady. As its cockpit started to swivel away from the crowd, Jaing raised his fist in the air and shouted "*Oya Mando! Oya!"* Skirata threw his fist up and shouted the same, and to Scout's surprise so did Besany and Ruusaan. She looked over her should at Vau

and saw the man with his jaw clenched tight, watching the freighter rise with dark eyes.

Aay'han fired its engines and hot air washed across the deck. The freighter shot into space and joined the starfighter. Both ships' flared in the distance for less than a minute before they winked into hyperspace and left drifting stars behind.

The group, united for that short moment, started to drift apart again. Besany went back to the medical bay to check on Ordo; Laseema, Skirata, and Ruu accompanied her. Kina Ha and Altis walked away, speaking in soft tones indicating private conversatin. Ny and Jaing went toward *Cornucopia*, which now looked so lonely on the empty deck. Lord Miradalan slunk out from between Scout's legs and wandered over to the rear exit, and Vau was no longer in the room at all.

Scout stood there next to Uthan, because neither of them had anyplace else to be. There was only the distant thrum of *Chu'unthor*'s engines and the faint clanking of machinery to fill the awkward silence.

Scout started for *Cornucopia*; she didn't know what she could help Jaing and Ny with but at least she could pretend to be useful. She got five strides away from Uthan when the doctor called out, “What will you do now, Scout?”

She turned, slowly, and was surprised by the open concern in Uthan's face. Her mouth curved down in a frown and her eyes glistened faintly. The woman had always found pride as a scientist, objective and analytical, and she'd only really let the impassive mask slip when she was with Gilamar. Since his death she'd gone cold again, but something had suddenly changed.

“I don't know,” Scout said. Her hands balled at her sides and she didn't take a step closer.

Scout didn't move in but Uthan did, four long steps. She looked like she wanted to put her hands on Scout's shoulders but stopped herself just out of arm's reach.

"You want to heal more clones don't you?" Scout asked warily. She wasn't used to seeing Uthan upset and didn't think she could give the woman what she needed.

"It's what Mij would have wanted," Uthan waved a hand at the hangar mouth. "What good is it if they're just going to throw their lives away?"

"They have to go. There's children on Belsavis. Someone *has* to save them."

"But not me." Uthan's hand fell to her side. "And not you."

Scout hugged herself tight. "I can't kill people. I'm not a fighter. Neither are you."

Uthan laughed bitterly. She craned her head back and stared up at the hangar's ceiling like she was contemplating a cosmic joke. "You know, when the Emperor killed my world I wanted nothing more than to kill his. I wanted to cook up a virus that would wipe out every last being on Coruscant. Every man, every woman, every child."

She talked like she was contemplating another woman's life. Scout asked, "What changed?"

"I don't know. Mij, maybe. A Mandalorian, talking someone out of murder. Well, stranger things have happened." Uthan sighed and looked down at Scout. "He saved that from my lab, though. The variants on the F36 virus I was… dabbling with. He even saved that. It's like he wanted me to have the choice to use it or not. Thoughtful of him, wasn't it?" She smiled sadly.

"It's good what you're doing with the clones. It's better than revenge. That just twists you all up inside until there's nothing left of what you used to be. It squeezes out all your light so there's nothing left but dark."

Uthan gave another bitter laugh. "More Jedi talk?"

"I *am* a Jedi," Scout said stiffly.

"You were," Uthan said. "Nobody's what they used to be. Not anymore."

Scout's hand fell on her lightsaber. It felt smooth and cool and somehow comforting, even though just hours ago

the thought of turning it on again had filled her with revulsion.

"I wasn't much of a Jedi before. I'm probably not much of one now. But I know what I want to be."

Uthan's features went soft again. She regarded Scout with a deep sadness in her eyes, not pitying but understanding.

"Wanting something is good," Uthan's voice cracked. "But what will you *do*, Scout?"

For a time, during that short peace on Kyrimorut, Scout had thought she might stay with Uthan and Gilamar, and that she'd finally found a place where she could belong, but as she stared at the woman on the broad empty flight deck she knew she couldn't stay with Uthan and Uthan couldn't stay with her. They'd both only remind each other of what had been lost.

Because she didn't have an answer to give, Scout turned around and started walking to Ny's freighter. This time Uthan didn't call after her. When Scout reached *Cornucopia*'s landing ramp and dared a look around, she was nowhere to be seen.

A'Sharad Hett and Jereveth Syne sat in the commander's quarters on *Iconoclast*. She was on the bed and he had pulled up a chair. They sat with kneecaps pointed toward each other and the empty space between them could have been breached by an outstretched hand, but neither of them dared to touch.

"I have to go now," he said. "Devis is getting her freighter prepped. I'll take the Headhunter. It's only a few hours to Belsavis. I just hope there's still people when we get there."

"One starfighter," Syne said, "And one freighter."

"That's right. Devis thinks Slayke will send a few bigger ships too. They'll hang at the edge of the system while we scout the area and determine its status."

"Did this Master Altis tell her anything else?"

"I don't think he knows much either. I heard he's scrambling people too. Maybe they'll get there first. I don't know."

Syne stared downward at the small, smooth hands dangling between her knees.

"I *have* to do this," he said. "These are *Jedi.* They're *children*. If I don't protect them-"

"You have your duty. Still."

A day ago he'd been resigned to his fate as the last Jedi in the universe, and with that resignation had come an acceptance that he was no longer what the Jedi Order had trained him to be. Syne was the most obvious proof of that, but hardly the only one.

Even when Devis had told him that there were other Jedi, with lovers and families no less, that hadn't changed things not really. The imminent threat to Belsavis, to twenty-some innocent children, had been a slap in the face. Whatever he was, Jedi or not, he couldn't stand by while the Emperor murdered children.

He reached across the distance and took her small white hands in his. "I'm coming back. No matter what happens at Belsavis. I'd never abandon you for Altis and his people. Never."

She didn't move her hands away and didn't look up. "You say that now."

"*Jereveth.* I am with you. To the end."

"I remember."

He had expected her to be worried when he announced he was going to Belsavis, but she'd become withdrawn and almost mournful. There was something troubling her beyond Belsavis, but he had no idea what it was.

Looking into other being's thoughts with the Force had never been his strength. He opened himself to it now and felt the anxiety coming off of Syne, and also some concentration gathered inward, as if she were as concerned about something else as much as she was about him and trying hard to hide it.

"Did Slayke tell you anything?" he asked. "Anything in private?"

She glanced up at him, dark eyebrows drawn together. "What do you mean?"

"I just... never mind," he shook his head.

In the beginning Syne, like the rest of her people, had been borderline paranoid about Hett using his 'Jedi magic' to read their minds. It had taken a long time for her to grow comfortable around him and trust that he wasn't plucking secrets from her head.

Even now, he wasn't plucking anything. He only felt some of the emotions he could see on her face.

The comlink in his pocket started buzzing. He took one hand off Syne's and brought it to his lips.

"Hett here. What is it?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

"This is Hallena," Devis said. "I've got my ship prepped. Are you ready?"

She asked the question delicately, like she knew exactly where Hett would be and what conversation he'd be having, and he wondered who the real mindreader was.

"I'll be down in a second," he said. He flicked the comlink off and stuffed it back in his pocket.

With his free hand he touched Syne's white chin and angled it upward. He leaned forward and kissed her on cold lips. When he pulled his head away she avoided his eyes.

"I'm with you to the end," he told her, and walked out of the room.

Darman sat on it the whole trip to Farstine. He waited, waited, waited for Niner to jerk upright in his chair and find some excuse to get Rede away so they could slip on their helmets and talk to *Kal'buir*. He needed to hear something, *anything* to know that his father had things under control, that they could come home, that his son was safe from the Jedi.

When they reached Farstine and nothing came, Darman knew he had to take matters into his own hands.

Space over the broad brown planet was busy. Even Rede, normally so unemotional, let out an impressed whistle as their blastboat drifted through a dense cluster of wedge-shaped warships, including a few *Venator*- and *Victory*-class destroyers and one of those new broad-winged *Secutor*-class carriers. They were ordered to pass through the fleet and dock at the orbital command station, which looked to Darman like some kind of three-ringed Sep gunnery platform someone had commandeered for the Empire's purposes. Small hangars and docking ports lined the outer edges of the station's rings, and one capital ship appeared to be linked directly with the station's freight loading apparatus. It was only half the length of Victory or Venator and instead of having a pointed nose like the traditional destroyer, its sides canted to separate points with a hangar bay gaping in between. To Darman it looked kind of like the mouth and mandibles of an insect.

"Never seen that kind before," Niner muttered as he maneuvered the blastboat over the destroyer, toward their assigned docking ring.

"That's a *Gladiator*-class," Rede supplied. "They're fresh off the docks. They're calling it a pocket destroyer. Packs just as much punch as a vic."

"They're getting ready for some big op, that's for sure," Darman muttered. He wondered if Melusar already knew the Jedi were on Belsavis; if so, he'd been agonizing silently for hours for no purpose at all.

"I wonder if Delta's here," Niner said, and Darman knew what he was thinking. Boss, Scorch, and Fixer had never gone full *Mando* like Omega Squad but they were good men, and they deserved the chance to live a full life.

Darman didn't know if they'd desert, even with that sort of bait in front of them. He could tell the cure to their rapid aging had Niner excited, but Darman had reacted to the news with a feeling of numbness. He couldn't figure out

why at first; his brothers already had been blessed with full lives, real lives, free from the Empire or the Jedi's influence, and he was happy for them, but the prospect of sharing that experience didn't excite him.

He kept on telling himself that now he could see *Kad'ika* grow up, and that alone was enough to celebrate, but not even that worked, because when he thought of his son he thought of his wife, and he knew no medical miracle could ever give him back the life they should have had together.

Their blastboat pulled into a secondary hangar already half-full with assault shuttles and ARC starfighters. There was no escort to meet Niner, Darman, and Rede, so after alighting the blastboat they did what good clone soldiers were expected to do and reported to the ranking deck officer. The lieutenant was a mongrel but he seemed to know his stuff. He directed them to the 501st barracks and places a call to Captain Melusar alerting him of their arrival.

The polished white corridors of the station were brisk with activity. Darman followed Niner and Rede to the appointed barracks, where they found the Deltas waiting for them in the locker room.

"So, look who's back!" Fixer grinned. He was sitting on the bench wearing only a towel and his skin glistened with water. "Didn't think we'd see you again!"

Boss, still in his armor, said, "We heard you were on a secret mission for Holy Roly. How did that go?"

"It went," Niner breathed as he took his helmet off. "What's going on here anyway?"

"Not a clue. We just got in a couple hours ago," Fixer said. "Shower's nice and warm, though."

"This used to be a Sep station, right?" Darman looked around. The lockers all looked brand-new.

Scorch noticed his gaze and rapped his knuckles on the shiny metal. "Yep. This is where the Nemoidians used to keep their tinnies. Now it's all fixed up and pretty for wets like us. Makes you feel special, don't it?"

"My faith in government is restored," Joc deadpanned.

Everyone chuckled dutifully, even Rede. Darman didn't know what to make of Joc. He was a veteran who'd made it through most of the war when the rest of his squad hadn't. That kind of loss was something they had in common, but Darman didn't trust him and couldn't feel the same bond he felt with his brothers in Omega or even the Deltas.

As his father might say, he was a good man, but he wasn't *vode*. Darman had no intention of sticking his neck out for Joc. He'd learned his lesson after trying that with Rede.

"Well, do *we* have orders?" Niner gestured to himself, Darman, and Rede. "Anything from Roly?"

"Yep," Boss nodded. "He's in his office. End of the hall to your right. I think he's waiting."

Niner glanced at Darman, but the moment their eyes met he jerked his head back to Boss and Darman thought *He knows*.

"Well, best not keep him waiting," Niner said. "Dar, Rede, with me."

He veered right for the door, not even looking at his men. Darman and Rede followed him out. They walked down the corridor and didn't say a word.

The soldiers might have gotten fancy new showers and locker rooms, but Holy Roly's office was a glorified broom closet with no windows and barely enough space for a desk. Melusar always had an ascetic quality about him and Niner wondered if the captain hadn't straight-up requested a bare and simple work space.

It probably didn't matter either way. None of them were going to be at Farstine for long.

Melusar stood behind his desk, the clones in front of it. Niner rattled off another report of the confrontation at Kyrimorut. Melusar looked at Niner the whole time and didn't let his eyes stray toward Darman, even though Darman could do nothing but stare at him.

He'd taken an instant liking to Melusar. The man seemed to care about his troops and he cared about the good of the

galaxy, and most of all he cared about getting rid of Force-users. The captain treated his clones like men, not war material, and for Darman that had been a shocking first.

He still wanted to believe all of that was true. He didn't trust Melusar and Melusar didn't trust him but their ends were the same and that meant they might be able to work together, because in the end, it wasn't about trust. It was about need.

After Niner finished his report he cleared his throat and asked, “Permission to ask a question, sir?”

“Of course,” Melusar said, so casual, so open.

“Sir, everyone seemed pretty confused about what we're here in Farstine for. Anything we could tell them to clear things up?”

Melusar smiled a little. “To be honest, sergeant, I'm not entirely sure myself. I'm set to meet with Admiral Grant in an hour and it seems he's preparing for an offensive in this sector.”

“Is this to involve Jedi, sir?” Niner asked. Darman's spine stiffened.

Melusar's smile didn't falter. “I would assume so. I promise I will tell all of you as soon as I find out.”

“We appreciate that, sir.”

“I don't want to keep you men in the dark. When I know, you'll know.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Anything else?” He still didn't look at Darman.

“No, sir.”

“Very good, sergeant. You're dismissed. You should try the showers after sitting in that blastboat for a few days. I hear they're quite good.”

“We've heard that too, sir. We'll give it a shot.”

Melusar gave a polite nod and sat down behind his desk, ending the meeting. Rede turned and went straight out the door. Niner got halfway there before he realized Darman hadn't budged.

Darman looked down at Melusar and said, “Sir, may we speak in private?”

Niner must have been glaring at the back of his head but Darman just stared right at Melusar. Their eyes met, finally.

“Go ahead,” said Melusar. “Niner, please leave us.”

Darman heard the door hiss shut. He breathed in, breathed out, stared into the captain's eyes. Then he said, “I know where the Jedi are.”

Melusar leaned forward. “Are you sure, Darman? Are you absolutely sure?”

“Altis has a safehouse on a planet called Belsavis.”

“Belsavis,” Melusar echoed. His eyes went distant, like he was trying to remember anything about the planet. Darman hadn't and had ended up looking up its info on the blastboat's nav computer when Rede and Niner weren't looking.

“On the border with the Senex Sector, sir,” Darman supplied. “It's mostly an ice world, but there are settlements in geothermal hot spots in its rift valleys.”

“Darman, is Kal Skirata on Belsavis?”

“No, sir. He said he's sending the Jedi there, including Arligan Zey.”

Melusar drummed his fingers one the tabletop, a fast *rat-tat-tat*. “Darman, if you're certain of this, I'm going to Admiral Grant right away.”

“I am, sir.”

Melusar popped to his feet. Suddenly on eye-level with Darman, he stretched out one hand over the desktop. “I know you didn't do this for me, Darman. But I appreciate it just the same.”

Darman stared at that hand. He couldn't remember ever shaking one before. He'd certainly never shaken Zey's, and he'd had no need to when he was with Etain or his family because he loved them, and a handshake was a symbol of formal respect between equals, not love.

He reached out and shook. Melusar's hand felt slightly cool and slightly damp.

Then Melusar slipped out from behind his desk and marched out into the hall. He didn't look back but Darman followed him anyway.

Niner was waiting for him when he came out, but he'd been expecting that. He waited until Melusar had disappeared down the hall before he turned his glare on Darman.

"What the *shab* was that, Dar? What did you tell him? Darman!"

He was in no mood for this. He did a long sidestep and tried to get past Niner but his brother grabbed him by the shoulder. Darman cocked up an elbow and snapped it back, not enough to hit Niner but enough to make him flinch and lose his grip.

Darman marched down the hall without looking back. Niner didn't come after him and didn't say a thing.

15

"I only met Callista Masana once. She struck me as being vital in a way the Jedi at the Temple weren't. I also thought she was beautiful, even if she was, as my masters would have said, attached. *I wish I could have known her better. I wish I'd had the chance."*

Something slapped the side of her face, hard, but when her eyes popped open she saw Geith looming over her with urgent concern in his eyes.

"Callie, are you okay?" his voice was fast, tight. "Callie?"

"I'm awake," she said, and suddenly she remembered everything: the search through the nebula, the escape from those strange Imperial fighters, and the frantic dive into the enemy hangar bay that had snapped her into unconsciousness.

She looked past Geith, turned her head left and right, and scanned the hangar. They'd managed to land in some small auxiliary bay. The only other ship was a skipray blastboat. There were no battle droids, no soldiers in white armor, nothing.

"Are we alone?" she whispered.

He nodded and ran a hand over her forehead, pulling back her brown hair and searching for wounds.

"I'm okay," she said, "Honest. Let me go."

"Okay," he said, but the worry didn't leave his eyes.

He pulled away from Callista and scampered over the hull of the Y-wing's cockpit pod. Callista followed him

down the short ladder onto the flight deck, taking it one rung at a time. When she stepped back from the Y-wing she saw how badly it had been damaged. One entire engine was a mangled mess of twisted metal, and black marks pocketed the armoring on the rest of the hull.

"Oh, this is awful," she said, "We'll never fly this thing out."

She felt faint for a moment, but steadied herself before Geith could come lurching to her air.

"There's always the skipray." He watched her carefully.

"Can you fly that boat?"

"I can fly anything." He tried to sound bold but it rang hollow.

Callista looked at the lightsaber still hanging from her belt. Its smooth metal surface had been carved and painted with images of sea-creatures from Chad, and the simple sight of it calmed her nerves and cleared her mind.

"There's no one else in here, is there?" she asked.

"Nobody's come for us. I thought I sensed some sentient life with the Force when we were flying over this rock, but it felt... weak, maybe, or distant."

"Very few."

"Probably."

Callista opened herself up the Force. She felt for life first and found nothing, but she stretched herself farther than that, into a place she'd been afraid to go since the start of the war.

Using the Force to influence energy and machines was one of Master Altis's special tricks, and Callista's youth on Chad, sensing the minute electric pulses that connected herds of cy'een in the ocean, made her his most promising student in that regard. As she reached out through the Force she could feel corridor after corridor, hallway after hallway, kilometers of stretched out equipment and cables pulsing with energy. This asteroid-carved facility was incredibly complex and incredibly massive, dwarfing *Chu'unthor*, even *Leveler*.

During the mission to rescue Hallena Devis on JanFathal, Callista had allowed her mind to be drawn into the electronic brain of the gunnery computer on Captain Pellaeon's *Leveler*, and for a drawn-out timeless second it had felt like her whole being had become one with the computer and left its human body behind for an incredible new spectrum of being. The experience had been exhilarating and terrifying and she'd avoided using the Force to touch computer minds since.

But there was a mind inside this monstrosity. She couldn't feel it, but she knew it was there. All the cables, all the sub-processors, all the equipment was all part of a massive web that spanned this behemoth, and in the center of that web was an electronic mind unlike anything she'd ever touched before.

"Callie!" Geith snapped. "Are you okay?"

She blinked and looked around. The concern was back on Geith's face and she wished she could cheerfully dismiss his worries, but she couldn't control her own.

"There's a mind on this thing," she said softly.

"What do you mean? Some kind of AI processing core?"

She nodded. "We have to find it, Geith."

There was a doorway only ten meters away. The door was shut but Callista could sense empty corridors beyond.

"This thing has to have security systems," Geith breathed.

"I can scramble them."

He put both hands on her shoulders. "Callie, you don't have to do this."

"Whatever this thing is, we have to stop it."

"We can try that skipray, get out of the nebula, comm Djinn and Plett. We don't know what we're getting into here."

Geith wasn't afraid for himself, he never was. He was afraid for her, which was endearing; it would have also been frustrating, if she hadn't been afraid too.

"We got inside this thing, Geith. That's a miracle in itself. We have to take this chance. Besides, I can sense what's

going on around us. I'll know if they send droids or something after us."

She'd told him of her experience aboard *Leveler*. He knew how frightened she was of repeating it. "If you're ever afraid you might-"

"Geith, we're doing this." She unclipped her lightsaber from her belt. "We don't have time to waste."

He took his hands off her shoulders and nodded grimly. She walked for the door and he followed. To her mild surprise, it opened automatically for them, revealing a long hallway half-lit by emergency lighting. She reached out with the Force, felt the bulkheads and conduits and the cables, found the node where an infrared camera-bulb was hidden, and convinced the camera to turn itself off.

"We're good," she said, "Let's keep going."

They passed through several corridors, each one the same, and each time she reached out with the Force to turn the camera off. Whenever a door hissed open she was afraid the were going to be staring down a column of battle droids or armed soldiers they'd somehow missed with the Force, but it was just one empty corridor after another.

"This place is *spooky*," Geith said when they wandered into a large room, probably a dining hall, where long tables jutted out in rows from either wall.

"There's obviously *supposed* to be people here," Callista said. "But it looks brand new, and I don't feel anything in the Force. I can't even sense any echoes of anyone's presence."

"I feel... something. Very feint. Like there might be people on this rock *somewhere*, but only a handful."

"Like those pilots?"

"Exactly. They have to know there's infiltrators on board."

"Well, I've been scrambling their sensors. That has to help our odds a little."

"Maybe there's so few here it takes them forever to get to our deck."

"Well, this thing is what, nineteen klicks long?"

"Something like that."

In one corner of the dining hall they found their first turbolift tube, and when Callista summoned it, it came quickly. She was hoping the tube might contain some schematic, or at least some vague description on what was on each deck level, but there was no such luck to be had.

They rode the lift up a single level and began exploring hallways identical to the ones on the floor below. Callista killed the sensors every time, but the more she did it the more natural it felt. That should have felt good but it didn't. Instead she felt like a part of her awareness had snagged on a corner of this asteroid's all-powerful governing computer and she couldn't shake it free.

Worse, she felt a part of that consciousness was pulling her, lightly but noticeable, though she couldn't imagine to where.

They eventually reached another mid-sized hangar, though this one contained more than just a blastboat and a battered Y-wing. There was a half-dozen boxy assault shuttles sitting there with their starboard-side doors wide open, as though they expected troops to come marching aboard any minute.

Callista scouted one shuttle, Geith another, and both reported the same thing. These brand-new craft seemed to be run by computers connected to the asteroid's governing intelligence.

"These shuttles are in a standbye mode," Geith said. "Their reactors are cool but running, which means they could heat up engines in under five minutes."

"You think they're going to be used soon?"

He nodded grimly. "I just can't figure for *what*. If they're launching an assault on Belsavis, why have a half-dozen empty assault shuttles?"

"Maybe they need to bring troops *onto* this thing before they launch an assault."

"It's going to take a lot of men to fill up this monster."

"Well, either way, it means *something* is going to happen soon. We have to hurry."

"Hurry to what?" He waved his arms at the vast gray bulkheads. "There's probably nobody anywhere on this entire damned rock except, just maybe, those command towers, and we have no idea how to get there. This thing isn't exactly visitor-friendly. No maps, no guides, no-"

"I know where to go," she said softly.

He stopped like she'd shouted. "Is the Force telling you something? Something from the machine?"

"Maybe." She repressed a shudder. "I can feel all the strands that hold this thing together. And there's *something* in the middle. It *wants* me to come."

"Callie... Are you *sure* about this?"

"No. But we have to do something."

"We could get on that blastboat and fly out."

"And have those fighters or guns shoot us down? No thanks. Geith, follow me. I... I think I can take us to it."

She led him back down the same corridors as before. This time, when they stepped into the lift she paused with her hand over the control console. She let herself fall into the Force, deeper than before. She pushed aside her own heavy hesitation and let the computer mind seep deeper into her own.

Without even looking, she touched the control panel. The lift shot up.

"Callie," Geith breathed, "Where are we going?"

She felt suddenly dizzy. "I don't know."

"Honestly, you're starting to scare me right now."

"Good," she said, "I'm scared too."

The lift dropped them off on another hallway. It looked the same as the others but it *felt* different. The artificial mind was almost pulling her down the hall, and it was only when Geith put a restraining hand on her shoulder that she remembered to turn off the security sensors.

She led him down one hallway, then another, and finally they came to something different. A red frame surrounded

black double-layered blast doors, which were locked with a high-level security code. It was the first such door they'd found on an otherwise obliging phantom ship.

Callista didn't need the key. She put her hand on the electronic locking mechanism and commanded it to open.

The door opened to reveal a long gangway stretched between gray walls marked here and there by strange opalescent panels. Callista squinted to see the far end of the poorly-lit corridor. She thought she saw a ladder leading up through a porthole rimmed with garish black-and-yellow warning colors.

"Is *that* it?" Geith's voice was dry.

She nodded with bitter certainty.

"Okay," he swallowed. "Let's see what's up there."

They went to the end of the gangway without incident, though Callista was pretty certain that the strange emitters on the walls were lethal defensive weapons silenced only by her having convinced the computer that she was an authorized entrant.

When they got close enough they could see that a metal grid sealed off the bottom of the tube, and a sign next to it read, in big yellow letters: ENCLISION GRID. NO FURTHER ASCENT. DANGER.

"Well," Geith muttered, "That doesn't sound good. How does it feel?"

"Something's up there."

She unhooked her lightsaber from her belt and turned it on. Before Geith could object, she sliced a hole in the grid. Smoking metal clattered to the gangway between them and she wasted no time in putting her lightsaber back on her belt and climbing up the ladder. Geith stood there for a moment, angry and confused, before he followed her up.

The shaft was long, and the walls around her were covered in cables and conduits. She could feel the energy surging through them, and all of it was heading *up* toward the red light of the chamber ahead. She reached out with

the Force for this so-called enclision grid, and while she sensed danger, it didn't feel immediate.

When they reached the chamber they found a room full of consoles with empty chairs in front of them. Callista walked down the aisle and stared at screen after screen, all of which showed the drifting gases and rocks of the surrounding nebula.

"This is a gunnery room." Geith said.

"I thought the guns were automatic."

"I don't know. Maybe they're meant to be manned by soldiers too."

Callista tentatively put a hand on the console. Remembering her transcendent and terrifying encounter with *Leveler*'s gunnery computer, she allowed herself to be drawn down familiar paths, like her soul was spilling into the battlestation's circuits and conduits. She felt the open eager mouths of the its guns, the alert eyes of its sensors, the soothing hum of distant power generators.

She tried to turn the gun on its turret, but it wouldn't budge. Then she tried to fire it, just to see if it would, but nothing happened.

This station was nothing like *Leveler*. Its unthinking artificial will was so much stronger.

A sense of dread filled her as she turned her attention to another ladder and another black-and-yellow-rimmed shaft. She stood beneath it and stared through its grid. Even more cables and conduits crawled up into the heart of the battle station. She felt like she was going to be sucked up into the shaft, and at the same time knew the so-called enclision grid, the bristling lethal energy emitters protruding from between all the cables and conduits, would destroy her body, but then and there her body didn't seem to matter much at all, not when her mind was so connected with something so much greater.

When Geith slapped both hands on her shoulders she realized he'd been shouting her name.

"Callista! Callista! Are you with me?"

"It's up there, Geith. The computer core. The heart of everything."

He looked up the shaft and couldn't hide the fear on his face. "That enclision grid. Can you disable it?"

"I can try." She couldn't lie to him.

He shook his head back and forth. "Callie, that's no good. It's not going to work."

"Geith, it *has* to work. It's the only way into the computer core. It's the only way to stop this thing."

"Do you know that? Do you absolutely know it?"

She nodded. "I don't know how, but I do."

He exhaled a long breath and looked back to the hole in the floor. "There's another way."

"What other way? Geith, we can't-"

"Sure we can," he flashed an empty smile and clambered down the ladder. Callista went after him. When she dropped onto the gangway he was already halfway down it.

"You want to make a run for it," she said as she followed him back to the lift.

"We need to make sure Plett knows about this thing," he said. "After that, we can meet up with Djinn, get a whole crew together, and find a way to *really* kick this thing's butt back to Coruscant."

They stepped into the lift and rode it back to the deck where their Y-wing had landed. "Those fighters are probably still out there, Gieth. And those guns started shooting at the end!"

"Don't worry, we'll take the blastboat. I'm sure it has that IFF emitter going."

When the door opened she practically had to chase him down the hall. "But what if it doesn't? What if the computer, or the actual *people* on this thing, figure out we're trying to escape? We won't have a chance, even in that blastboat."

They stepped into the hangar to find it as they'd left it, broken-down Y-wing and brand-new blastboat waiting like an invitation.

"Callista, we can do it." Geith put his hands on the back of his belt. He was trying to contain the anxiety in his voice and failing. "This station lays its fire in a defensive double-ellipse pattern. We got in, didn't we?"

"The Force was with us, or we'd never have made it."

"I'd like to think I had something to do with that." Geith's mouth twisted downward.

He was getting upset. She said, "You did. Of course you did. The Force-"

"I know." He waved her off. "The point is, there are other ways of doing this than getting ourselves killed."

He was scared. Finally, at long last, she got to see Geith when he was truly scared and it was awful. Death was making him wilt before her eyes. She wanted to muster his kind of bravado and tell him they'd find some way out of this, but she she knew she couldn't make it stick.

"Geith, if there was any way for me to go up that shaft you know I-"

"I'm telling you neither of us has to do it, Callie," he snapped. "It's not going to take us that long to get clear of the Nebula's interference and back to where we can signal for help. Help in dealing with this hunk of junk and at least let Plett know what's coming at him. As it is, if we try to play heroes and fail, they won't know zip until they catch a lapful of smoking plasma."

"They won't know if we make a run for it and get nailed either."

"It's a double ellipse with one randomized turn. I've got it scooped, Callie. It'll be tougher in that tub than the Y-wing but it can be done."

She opened her mouth to object but he stepped forward, placed one hand on her shoulder, and a finger against her lips. When she looked up at his eyes she realized there was no way she could get him to come with her up that shaft.

"You don't have to be such a hero, baby," he said, "There's always ways of doing things without getting killed."

"Geith, sometimes there's not." It pained her to say it out loud. It felt like she was reading her own death sentence.

He threw up his hands. "Now you're starting to sound like old Djinn!"

"That doesn't make what I'm saying less true."

"The old boy's too ready too damn ready to tell other people how to die!" He was waving his arms and almost shouting. "Callie, I've been around. I know what I'm talking about."

"And I know that we have no idea how long we've got until this thing goes into hyperspace. None." She kept her voice steady and firm. She had to try, one more time. "If we destroy it, it's gone. Dead. And if we leave it, run for-"

"There's nothing wrong with jumping clear and getting help!"

"Except that it'll lose us our one chance."

"It'll lose us our one chance of getting the hell blown up along with this thing, you mean!"

"Yes. That's what I mean. Will you help me or not?"

She was as surprised by her own courage as by Geith's cowardice. She could still feel the computer mind whirring away inside her own. She felt grappled to this strange ship through the Force and could barely conceive of breaking free.

Geith put his hands on his hips and looked down at her. His face twisted in sad affection. "You stubborn fish-rider."

"Don't leave me, Geith," her voice cracked. She could face death, but she didn't think she could face losing him, not after all they'd been through. "I can't do it alone."

He looked away, and she knew she'd lost him. Whether or not either of them survived, she'd lost him.

"I'm going to make a run for it, Callie." He couldn't look at her.

"Geith, I can't go. I can't give up this chance. I'll go up that shaft alone if I have to."

They stood there in the hangar, awkwardly apart, both contemplating different deaths and neither willing to take the necessary step toward it. Callista wrenched herself forward, stepped up on two toes, and touched Geith's face softly. She turned his head to face hers and kissed him once. It was a long and warm kiss but it felt like a sad echo of what they'd shared in the past.

It felt like he was already dead.

When they pulled apart, he still couldn't look her in the eye. “Callie, I have to go.”

She could cry, she could scream, she could get on her knees and plead, but she knew all of it would fail. In the end, behind all the swagger and ideals and strong convictions, all the love she thought they'd shared, there was this.

She felt like her life had already ended.

“Get up to that gunnery computer,” he told her. “See if you can kill those cannons. I'll give you five minutes to get up there, then I'm taking this boat and making a run for it.”

She nodded stupidly. She could still put in that much effort, though she knew in her heart and in the Force that it wouldn't do any good.

“Don't do this to me, Geith,” she whispered. “Don't do this.”

He turned and started for the blastboat. He took long staggered steps and didn't turn around. She watched his back for as long as she could, knowing she'd never see his face. Then she turned and ran.

She sprinted down the hallway, crashed into the lift. She punched the console and rode it up and ran down the new hallways, across the clanging gangway, and hauled herself up the ladder into the gunnery room. She stumbled, collapsed, hit her elbows hard on the hard deck. Her lungs scraped for breath but she wanted to run forever.

The computer mind was clawing deeper into hers now, so strong it could almost drown out her grief. She pushed herself off the deck and staggered over to the console she'd

touched before. She leaned hard against it with both hands and let herself fall into the computer mind and let the computer mind close around hers.

It happened in an instant. It felt like she'd reverted to a natural state of being: her mouth was a gun-barrel, her legs were the spinning pivot of the turret, her eyes were electronic sensors that saw light far beyond the visual spectrum.

She stretched herself further. It was so easy. She became hundred gun-barrels and two hundred eyes, spotted all over the hull of the monstrous machine. She became a body floating in the brilliant beautiful void, and her skin tingled with the impossible cold of space. Her lungs drew in stardust and exhaled radiation.

It was incredible and it was awful. It was like her experience on *Leveler* but so, so much more.

She so was so overwhelmed she almost missed Geith taking off.

When her two hundred eyes saw the flare of the blastboat's engines she pulled all her gun-barrels away, like she was throwing her hands up in the air. She commanded them to stop, to cease, to move no more, and for a moment she watched with those two hundred eyes and saw Geith's blastboat soaring free into the nebula.

Then the guns swung forward. She tried to pull them back again but her limbs moved of their own volition. Her body retched; she vomited hot plasma that streaked through space. Geith spun his clunky attack craft into a sharp roll, dodging one volley. He pulled up, evading another blast (Callista screamed silently but couldn't stop it) and pointed his nose toward the asteroid field. He wove around one space rock, then another, then snapped another roll that barely evaded a volley of turbolaser blasts-

-and then one of her shots clipped his stabilizer. His blastboat corkscrewed, trailing a tight spiral of fire, then collided with an asteroid and exploded.

Callista screamed, loud enough to scrape her throat, and suddenly she had a throat again, a throat of cartilage and blood vessels, and her limbs were muscle and bone and her eyes blurred the gunnery room's red lights with swelling tears.

As *Valediction* and *Salvation* cut through the brilliant red, pink, and violet gasses of the Moonflower Nebula, Lieutenant Mynar Vernedet slipped alongside his captain and said, “May look pretty, sir, but it turns our sensors into absolute *poodoo*.”

Gilad Pellaeon gave his friend a sideways smirk. “Watch your mouth, Lieutenant. We have guests aboard.”

Commodore Zaarin was on the far side of the bridge, hovering over the shoulder of the tech who handled communication with the hangar deck. He'd spent most of the flight out from Farstine bent next to the poor woman's ear, requesting constant updates from the deck crew as to the status of his prized new starfighters. He certainly wouldn't be hearing any swears in the far side of the room, and if he had heard, Pellaeon suspected he wouldn't care. Zaarin was a big, gruff, edgy man who didn't seem much concerned for formalities, which explained why he and Grant didn't get on well.

And then there was Ameesa Darys, who stood pressed close to the forward viewport but out of earshot, or at least, out of earshot for normal beings. Somehow, Pellaeon didn't think she cared about an officer's language either.

“At this point we're flying blind, Gil,” Vernedet said, still under his breath. “We just have to chase the coordinates Grant gave us and hope the *Eye* hasn't drifted too far off-target.”

“There's plenty of rocks floating out there,” Pellaeon squinted at all the black specks drifting through the gases. “It has to be one of them.”

“I hope so.”

As he watched the asteroids something caught Pellaeon's eye. He saw flashes of light, faint and distant, but even against the rosy backdrop of the nebula he recognized the crisp, brilliant green of Imperial turbolaser blasts.

"You spot that?" He didn't want to alarm the crew, not until he was sure he wasn't seeing things.

"Looks like laserfire to me, sir. Was that an explosion?"

There was something, a brief flash of light perhaps, but it didn't repeat.

"Lieutenant, raise an open comm frequency. Let's see if we can hail Ohran Keldor through this muck."

"Yes, sir," Vernedet clicked his heels and marched off the comm station.

Pellaeon followed and wondered if he should put the crew on yellow alert. Keldor could easily have testing the *Eye*'s gunnery systems on surrounding asteroids; in fact, it was the most likely explanation. Still, something didn't sit right with him, and the worry must have shown on his face, since Zaarin pulled himself away from his harried comm officer and intercepted Pellaeon.

"Well, are we there yet?" Zaarin asked. Very brusque, not Grant-like in the least.

"We're nearing the coordinates now. We're attempting to hail the battlemoon, though with this interference I'm not sure how successful we'll be."

Pellaeon followed Verndet and Zaarin followed him. The three officers hunched over the back of a horn-headed Zabrak lieutenant who said, "We seem to be getting a signal, sirs, but it's a little hard to clean up."

"Keep working on it," Pellaeon said. "Repeat our hail to Keldor. Tight-beam out signal to the source of his last transmission."

"Doing it now, sir... Sirs, we're getting a response. Clearer this time."

"Let's hear it."

Static blared over the speaker, making Vernedet wince. The Zabrak turned the volume down but Pellaeon leaned

closer. He could hear a voice, all right, and could barely make out scattered words. He heard “escape,” “firing solution,” “engines,” “fighters,” and finally “problem.”

“That damned prat,” Zaarin scowled. “I *knew* something would go wrong.”

“Do you have any idea what, sir?”

“Probably some bad subroutine in that 'Will' of his. Take us closer, Captain.”

“Commodore, if this station is having issues, it might be safer to-”

“We can't even *talk* to Keldor unless we get close. Take us in, Captain, that's an order.”

Pellaeon knew when not to pick a fight. He gave Vernedet a sharp nod and his first officer marched off to relay orders, while another comm officer called up Captain Hornar.

Valediction and *Salvation* edged forward through the asteroid field, but Pellaeon stayed where he was, right next to the comm system with Zaarin, waiting for some revelation to appear from his static. He was so absorbed with trying to make sense of the noise that he didn't notice when Ameesa Darys appeared behind him, silent as a shadow.

He nearly jumped out of his boots when she said, “There is a problem.”

It took Pellaeon a second to still his racing heart, and from Zaarin's expression the Commodore had the same palpitations. Then he realized that Darys hadn't asked a question; she had issued a statement.

“Do you know what kind of problem?”

She tilted her head thoughtfully. “There is a Jedi on that battlemoon.”

“*Jedi*!” Zaarin snarled. “The one you felt at Farstine?”

Darys pursed her lips, then shook her head. “No. This one feels... different.”

“Different? Different *how*?” Pellaeon snapped. He wasn't in the mood for gooey Jedi mysticism.

Darys thought again, then said, “At Farstine I felt control and determination.”

“And here?”

“Agony.” Her eyebrows drew together, creasing her face. Her voice betrayed the first emotion Pellaeon had heard since she arrived. “I feel agony.”

The consoles in the gunnery room had started beeping, but Callista barely noticed. She sat on the edge of the console, body curled up on itself. One arm was stretched out and her fingers glided across the keypad. She found the command marked VISUAL REPLAY and tapped it.

“Don't do this to me, Geith,” she whimpered, “Don't do this.”

She couldn't take her eyes away. She watched as Geith's fighter danced, as nimble as anything she'd ever seen, weaving around asteroids and laser blasts, until he was almost clear, and then that final shot just barely clipped his ship and sent him spiraling into fiery death.

The bright white of the explosion lit her face. She closed her eyes against its awful brilliance, wiped her face dry, and opened them again.

She looked at the other consoles. A few of their screens had come on. She walked over to one and looked at the image of a pair of star destroyers gliding imperiously thought the nebula, blasting stray asteroids as they went.

Callista felt exhausted of grief. The computer mind was clawing into hers once more. She stepped over to the shaft in the ceiling and stared up at the enclision grid. The weapon emitters looked like hungry mouths, faintly gleaming in the dark. She felt them waiting, and felt behind them the anxiety of the machine mind waiting for her beyond the shaft. It knew it faced a dangerous intruder that stood a good chance of ruining ithe mission for which it had been designed.

She breathed in and out one more time. Then she pulled on the Force, the living Force, the Force that thrived even

in this place of cold machinery and calculating artificial minds.

Then Callista Masana threw herself upward, into the jaws of death.

Hot laser blasts charred her skin and tore the scorched flesh from her bones. She barely noticed. Her body was cut to pieces as it flew up the short, infinitely long shaft, pulled by the Force as though on a string. She didn't care. She didn't *need* to reach that final, forbidden chamber. She was inside the monster's heart already. She was two hundred eyes and one hundred mouths and every slab of rock and stretched-out cable, every metal bulkhead, every troop transport waiting for a command that would never come.

The monster's enclision grid burned her corpse to ash, but she was no longer a body.

She'd become the monster's soul.

A lightsaber, its frame carved with images of oceans and graceful sea-beasts, tumbled out of the shaft and clattered to the floor of the gunnery room. It rolled once, then lay still.

"We had.... issues.... minor issue... Seems to be resolved now," Keldor's voice faded in and out through the static.

Pellaeon and Zaarin leaned over the Zabrak lieutenant's horned head, straining to make out every word, while Ameesa Darys stood behind them, lazily looking across the bridge like she didn't care. Vernedet was elsewhere, keeping everyone else under control.

"What about the Jedi?" Zaarin said. "Did you neutralize the Jedi?"

There was a burst of static, then Keldor spoke again. "Repeat? Did.... say Jedi?"

"A *Jedi*, Keldor! A Jedi infiltrator! If they found this place they've probably started evacuating Belsavis by now!"

Before Pellaeon could recommend they move at least one destroyer out of the nebula for a hyperspace jump to the

target planet, Darys sucked in breath and said, “She is gone.”

“*She*?” Zaarin glared at her. “As in your Jedi? Dead?”

“Automatics... fences...” Keldor crackled, “Outside the computer core. No more...”

“If the Jedi is gone, let's *all* get out of here,” Zaarin said.

“I couldn't agree more, sir,” Pellaeon said. He got two strides toward helm control when something lit up space outside their forward viewport.

The *Eye of Palpatine*'s guns began spewing green plasma bursts in every direction. *Salvation* had edged ahead of *Valediction*, close enough put her within firing range, and Captain Hornar's vessel caught a faceful of turbolaser fire before she could put up her shields. Explosions tore through her hull and one of her engines sputtered and died. Vernedet quickly ordered all shields up, but *Eye* stopped firing as soon as it had begun.

“What the hell is that?” Pellaeon barked as he ran back to the communications console and stuck his face in the speaker grill. “Keldor, report! What just happened?”

His reply was only static. Behind him, Darys muttered, “Something is wrong.”

“Oh, really?” Zaarin snarled. “I'm glad we have you here, I had no idea.”

The woman's jaw dropped. “She's not dead!”

Pellaeon and Zaarin stared at each other in mutual incomprehension. Then there was another flare of light up ahead. Pellaeon grabbed the console with both hands but no laser blasts rocked his ship.

What he saw was worse. *Eye of Palpatine*'s thrust engines were flaring like maniac strobe lights. The asteroid moved forward in awkward lurches, and Pellaeon was reminded of nothing so outrageous as a drunk man trying to sprint.

Zaarin elbowed the captain away from comm station and shouted, “Keldor, get my fighters out of there! Launch all TIEs! Launch them all!”

He got no reply except static.

Then there was another flash, and suddenly the two star destroyers were alone in the nebula.

Pellaeon's jaw dropped. “It jumped to hyperspace? That's impossible! The gases, the asteroids-”

Zaarin punched the back of the Zabrak's chair so hard the lieutenant slammed into his own console. “Idiot! That kriffing idiot!”

Vernedet jogged up to the console and said, “Sirs, we're picking up a few signals.”

“What kind of signals?” Pellaeon asked. The entire scene was surreal; it sounded like someone else's voice in his ears.

“A few short-range fighters.” He glanced at Zaarin. “And a few escape pods. They barely jettisoned before it made the jump to hyperspace.”

“How could it jump through the nebula? The mass shadow of all those rocks and gases-” Pellaeon threw up his hands. He didn't know what had happened to that battlemoon and he probably never would. “Never mind. Send out rescue crews. Pick up those pods.”

“*And* those fighters,” Zaarin added.

“*And* the fighters. And, comm, get a sitrep from Captain Hornar. See if she can get out of his nebula on her own.”

Vernedet dashed off and the Zabrak put in the call. Zaarin, no longer spitting mad but merely seething, told Pellaeon, “We need to go to Belsavis right away, even if we go alone.”

“I agree completely.” Pellaeon glanced at Darys, hoping but not expecting her to shed some illumination on whatever had happened in the nebula. She had an expression of mild confusion on her face and didn't notice him at all.

The Zabrak announced, “Sirs, Captain Hornar says he has one downed engine. Hyperdrive might be repaired, but he needs time.

“Casualties?” Pellaeon asked

"Unspecified, sir."

Salvation had clearly suffered some hull breaches. There would be dead, all right. There would by Imperial families mourning sons and daughters, and when they asked why or even how, nobody would have any idea what to tell them, least of all Pellaeon.

When Vernedet reappeared, he said, "Captain, we're pulling in the escape pods now."

"Do you have room for the fighters in your bay?" Zaarin asked.

"Just barely, sir. And, ah, one of the escape pods has identified itself as belonging to Ohran Keldor."

Zaarin laughed bitterly. "Of course. Ranats are good swimmers."

Pellaeon ignored him. "Lieutenant, once all pods are aboard, get us out of this nebula. When we're clear, put us on course for Belsavis, best speed."

"Yes, sir," Vernedet snapped a salute, and he was off again.

Pellaeon fought back a very deep sigh and turned to Darys. If they were going to be fighting Jedi they were going to need something more than cool and cryptic.

"Miss Darys, for the sake of this mission, I need to know all you do about the Jedi base on Belsavis."

She looked at him like she was noticing a bug for the first time, then said, "Of course, Captain. The Emperor has waited a long time to bring Master Altis to justice."

His mind froze; his breathing stopped. Somehow his throat rattled out, "Altis?"

Darys nodded once, and Pellaeon felt his whole world fall away.

Before any of them really knew what was happening, they were being herded out of the ready rooms, down the pale corridors of Farstine Base, and into the hangar, where a pair of new assault shuttles were waiting to whisk them away to who-knew-where for who-knew-what mission.

The clone commandos filing into the shuttles moved quickly and efficiently and, to the ears of mongrel officers moving them like cattle, they were completely silent too. Inside, Niner had his helmet on and his comm transceiver set to a wide frequency, which meant he got to hear all the chatter bouncing between clones.

"This is great timing," Joc griped, "I was just going into the shower."

"I heard they're nice," said one of the boys from Squad Six; Sergeant Brant maybe.

"Try 'em when we get back," Fixer said as he hopped into the belly of the assault shuttle. It had room for two pilots plus three squads, which in this case meant ex-Delta, ex-Omega, and the Sixers.

"Yeah, *if* we get back," said Soru, another Sixer.

"Shut your mouths," Boss ordered. "Strap in and get ready for liftoff."

The assault shuttle had the rows of benches with backs against the outer walls. The clones squeezed themselves in and strapped crash webbing over their chests; they wouldn't need it during take-off, but since they had no idea where their destination was, it was smart to stay strapped in until advised otherwise.

Niner found himself squeezed between Scorch and one of the Sixers near the front of the cabin. Darman and Rede sat in the opposite corner. Dar hadn't said a word to him since his meeting with Holy Roly, and that had been more than an hour ago.

When the action order went down an awful feeling had settled in Niner's gut, but he hadn't called Dar on it. He didn't know for sure. He wasn't going to accuse his brother of anything, not without proof.

Fierfek, he hoped it wasn't true, even though all logic said it was.

"Incoming transmission. Routing through personal comlinks" announced the pilot. He had a white helmet on, so he was with Farstine command instead of the 501st, and

his accent was a little weird. He might have been another Spaarti clone.

"Who from? Holy Roly?" asked Soru.

Scorch checked the comlink readout on his wrist. "Oh, *shab*, looks like the admiral himself."

"Well, la-dee-da. What's he got to say?"

"Let's find out," Niner said, and played the message.

The admiral's voice was clipped and precise and rather prissy. He said, "Gentlemen, your mission is to rendezvous with the star destroyer *Valediction* in the Belsavis system. You will be-"

Niner killed Grant's message, killed all his audio input and output. He squeezed his eyes shut and saw nothing, heard nothing except his own breathing rattling through the blackness of his helmet.

He tried to think *what would* Kal'buir *do?* but he was overwhelmed by the staggering simple fact that his father would have never let things get this bad. He wouldn't have tiptoed around Darman, wouldn't have cowered for fear of hurting him, he'd have smacked sense into the man and stopped this mess.

He would have taken responsibility.

As it was, all Niner could do was switch his comlink to Darman's private channel and rasp, "Darman, what did you do? *Shab* it, Dar, *what did you do*?"

"I'm protecting my family," Darman said, voice brittle. "Some one has to."

"Dar, what are you doing? Zey's there, maybe Altis! Maybe some of our *vode*! Darman! Dar!"

He got no response. Darman had closed off his helmet link.

He'd lost his brother forever.

16

"I had come to hate the only life I'd ever known and turned my back on everyone who raised me. I saw a woman whom I loved like a sister cut down while her husband watched and her newborn child cried, and at the same time all those people I'd abandoned were dying one after another. Still, when I remember the black tunnels and white snow-fields of Belsavis, I can only call it the worst day of my life."

When *Aay'han* reverted to realspace over Belsavis, Maze was crammed into the cockpit cabin, shoulder-to-shoulder with the masked Kel Dor Jedi Nor Vald, while Fi and Mereel held the pilot and copilot's seats. The massive white sphere of the ice planet swelled in their viewport, and for a moment its white glare obscured the pinpoints of the surrounding stars.

Then his vision adjusted, and Maze saw the pale dagger of a star destroyer hanging in the planet's middle orbit. It sat a safe distance away, nearly a third of the orbit's total circumference, but *Aay'han* was sure to show up on its scanners just as it was showing on theirs.

"Aw, *shab*, that's one of those new destroyers," Mereel muttered as he checked the scanners.

"Have they seen us?" Nor Vald leaned over Mereel's shoulder. The clone threw up a hand to bat him away.

"Are A'den and Kom'rk here?" Maze asked.

He got his answer when the Aggressor fighter blazed ahead of them. Its two red engine-flares momentarily eclipsed the distant star destroyer.

"*Mer'ika*, you copy?" one of the clones called over the main comm system.

"Loud and clear, *Kom'ika*," Mereel leaned forward and two long braids spilled off his armored shoulder. "You see that vicstar?"

"Hard to miss. Not launching fighters. *Yet*."

"Might already be down on the planet. What are your scanners showing?"

"Some hot light down on the surface... Northwest hemisphere, say, twentieth latitude and..."

"We've got it," Fi said from the helm. "Punching in."

Maze looked at the Jedi. "Can you put in a call to your buddies?"

"There's a signal I can use. If Margolis is listening, she'll know it."

They didn't know who Margolis was and didn't care. Mereel made a few adjustments to the comm system and said, "All yours, *jetii*."

The clone pulled his armored body out of the copilot's seat. Nor Vald awkwardly squeezed in past Mereel and took his place. His long red fingers danced across the keypad and *Aay'han* started broadcasting some encrypted signal.

"We better not be too late," Fi muttered.

The planet's white face was filling the viewport and the Aggressor was keeping pace on their starboard flank. Maze leaned forward to see the destroyer, still hovering in place without firing or launching any new ships. It should have been a good sign, but Maze knew it wasn't. It meant the destroyer had already disgorged most its fighters to attack the Jedi safehouse.

"I'm getting no response," Nor Vald shook his head.

Mereel leaned forward and punched the communications console. "*Kom'ika*, get ready, it's gonna get hairy fast."

"Copy. *Ad'ika*'s in the gun turret. Picking up any snub-fighters yet?"

"They're out there," Fi muttered. "Still getting those energy signatures from that valley up ahead."

"That's right where Djinn said they'd be," Nor Vald sounded grim.

Sunlight and blue sky filled their viewport. White clouds whipped past. Maze leaned close to the Jedi. "What can you tell us about this place? We need intel."

"I've never been here before, but Djinn says it's in a big valley. Very hot, very tropical."

"You sure about that?" Mereel grunted.

"It's a *rift* valley. Thermal energy- never mind. It's supposed to be hard to find."

"Looks like the Imps found it well enough," Fi said. "I'm getting incoming."

"You hear that, *Kom'ika*?" Mereel called.

"Ready to light 'em up," came the reply.

Fi flipped on the ship's internal comm systems. "We need both gun turrets manned, *now*."

From the rear cabin one of the clones called, "On it, boss!"

Maze heard the clatter of scampering feet but kept his attention on the viewport. He spotted high white-capped mountains up ahead, topped by what seemed to be clusters of dark clouds illuminated from inside by flashes of lightning.

Nor Vald saw them too. He explained, "The hot air from the planet core meets the cold air from the plain, and-"

"We get it, *jetii*," Mereel said. "Where are those fighters, Fi?"

"I'm getting a signal... Incoming, four o'clock!"

"We see them!" Kom'rk called. "*Shab*, what are those?"

The air was filled with an awful howling sound. Lances of green plasma shot across the sky. *Aay'han* and the Aggressor split, and Fi's hard roll to port nearly threw Maze into a wall. The freighter's internal gravity struggled to compensate against the planet's own and he felt tightness in his chest as he held onto the back of Fi's chair.

Aay'han's two turret guns started firing. Maze felt their vibrations rattle through the ship and saw red laser blasts flash against the pale blue sky, but he still couldn't see the enemy fighters. Fi pitched the freighter into a sharp dive, and the viewport filled with jagged mountains and billowing black clouds.

"If we keep low we should miss most of the storm," Fi called.

"How low?" asked Maze.

Fi flew out a breath, shrugged, but before he could say something the Aggressor darted in front of them.

"Little help here!" Kom'rk called, just as three starfighters appeared on his tail.

They were like nothing Maze had ever seen before; their cockpits were near-perfect spheres and big, flat, black six-sided solar panels sat in parallel on either side of the cockpits.

One of A'den's stray blasts hit a fighter dead-on and the craft exploded immediately. Another shot, from *Aay'han* clipped a second fighter in the wind and sent it spiralling toward the snowy plain below. The last one pulled up, and Kom'rk shunted his fighter's engines, pitched his nose skyward, then kicked off in pursuit.

"Well, that's not bad," Mereel muttered.

"Those things were fast, though," Maze said. "More like a V-wing than an Eta-2. I think-"

Aay'han suddenly shuddered as laser blasts exploded on its aft shields.

Fi called, "Somebody keep our butts clean!"

"Working on it," one of the clones said, and Maze could feel the distant reverberations of the gun turrets firing.

The mountains were coming up fast. Fi dove further, aiming the freighter in the narrow space between snowswept rock and flashing storm. The Aggressor was nowhere to be seen but Maze trusted Kom'rk and A'den to look after themselves.

"Watch your belly, Fi," Mereel said.

"Just watch me fly, *Mer'ika*," Fi grinned, but his voice trembled.

The rocks sprung up beneath them, whipping by too fast to see anything but a gray-and-white blur. *Aay'han* crested one peak, dipped into a valley, climbed up again, and then dipped once more. Suddenly the snow disappeared. Rain pounded and blurred their viewport with fat pellets. Black volcanic rock climbed high around them while a lush jungle swelled up from the chasms and ravines below.

"Well, *shab*," Mereel said, "Looks like you were right, *jetii*."

"*At'ika*, where are those fighters?" Fi called up to the gun turrets.

"One shot down, two crashed," Atin reported. "These winds really messed them up."

Maze could understand why; their strange shape was clearly designed for space combat, not atmospheric.

"Okay, *jetii,*" Mereel clapped a hand on Nor Vald's shoulder. "Where's these kids of yours?"

"I don't know. I told you I've never been here."

"Can't you use your Force or something?"

The Kel Dor canted his head to one side. His face was alien and hard to read even without that breathing mask, but Maze suspected he was communing with the Force of his somehow.

"Maybe.... Nine o'clock," the Jedi muttered.

"Good enough," Fi jerked the fighter port. Lightning flashed overhead, and a jolt of crackling electricity nearly stabbed their freighter.

"We need to set down," Maze said.

"No, you think?" Mereel snapped. "See anything, Fi?"

"I'm picking up something down in the valley... A heat signature..."

Something flared down in the jungle, like sparks from flint. Maze stabbed a hand forward and said, "There! See it?"

"I've got it." Fi put *Aay'han* into one more dive.

As they got close it became clear the light was not just jumping sparks. The enemy fighters must have gotten into the valley before the storms rolled in, because a small settlement had clearly been slagged to rubble. Lasers had punched through the center of a vast transparisteel dome. A tall stone tower had been toppled. To one side, a midsized freighter lay shattered and smoldering on its landing pad.

Despite it all, the Kel Dor didn't sag in defeat. He said, "They're still alive down there."

"How?" Mereel snapped.

"There are tunnels beneath the settlement, *lots* of them," Nor Vald insisted. "I can find them."

Mereel looked like he wanted to swear, but said, "Okay, let's get ready for an insertion. Fi, stay in the cockpit and keep a comm line open. Tell *Kom'ika* to keep the fighters busy, but if they get into the valley, *run*."

Maze expected Fi to object, but the man just nodded.

"Come on, let's get our *shebs* in gear," Mereel slapped Maze and Nor Vald on the shoulder.

He stalked out into the main cargo hold, Jedi and commando behind him. The cabin was already busy. Bardan Jusik, dressed in full Mandalorian armor and helmet, had his lightsaber at his belt and a Verpine rifle in his hands. Corr and Atin appeared from the gunnery wells and scampered for their helmets. Zey helped Ash Jarvee put on spare combat armor and Mereel and Prudii pulled each other in for a hug that cracked their *beskar* together.

Maze looked at them all and didn't know where he belonged. Then Zey stepped lightly away from Ash and clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"Are you ready, Maze?" he asked.

For a moment Maze was struck by the change that had suddenly come over Zey. The Jedi Master had seemed old, sullen and bowed since even before Order 66, but the Zey in front of him now was the determined man he'd been introduced to at the start of the Clone Wars. It felt like a lifetime ago; in some ways it had been.

Zey looked like a man who was not afraid, because he knew what he had to do.

"I'm ready." Maze stopped himself before adding *Sir.*

There was a slight shudder as *Aay'han* set down in the midst of the ruined settlement. Fi kept the repulsors going even as he lowered the landing ramp, and a gust of hot wet air shot up into the cabin.

Mereel Skirata, helmet cralded in both hands and Verp rifle slung off one shoulder, bellowed, "Okay, let's go save those kids! *Oya Mando*!"

"*Oya Mando*!" echoed Jusik, Prudii, Atin, Corr.

And to his own surprise, Maze added his own voice to the chorus. But nobody noticed, not even Zey. Mereel shoved his helmet onto his head and led them down the ramp and into the hard rain.

Gilad Pellaeon stood on the deck of his ship, one of the newest and most capable vessels in the Galactic Empire, feeling more helpless than he ever had in his entire life.

He was at the front of the bridge, staring at the blank white face of Belsavis as though he could somehow divine through eyesight alone the events happening on its surface. He had no way of knowing if Hallena was on that planet; he didn't even know if Djinn Altis was. All he knew, all that Ameesa Darys had told him, was that some of Altis' associates had been traced to the planet.

Behind him, Zaarin was interrogating poor Vernedet, saying, "What is the status of the fighter wing? How many losses? Did they shoot down the intruders?"

"I, ah, I'm not sure, sir, we're still waiting for a response from the wing commander, sir, but we've lost seven beacons thus far."

"Well, hail him *again*, Lieutenant!" Zaarin turned his angry gaze over to Pellaeon. "Captain! I suggest we launch another fighter wing."

"I'd like a report from the wing commander first," Pellaeon tried to sound like a star destroyer captain,

controlled and commanding. Normally he could fake it, but not when he had Zaarin in his face and icy dread in his gut.

"Ah, we're getting a call now, sirs!" Vernedet announced.

Pellaeon allowed a tiny sigh of relief as Zaarin chased Vernedet over to the communications station. He turned his attention to Darys, who like him had been standing by the viewport, staring down at the planet, though unlike him, she actually had some elusive Force powers that told her what was going on.

He decided to try and act commanding with her. "Miss Darys, can you give me any update on what has happened on the planet?"

Her black eyebrows drew together. "They are still alive."

"*They*. Can you tell how many? Species, age, sex?"

She shook her head. "There are many. They are frightened, but I do not think we have killed any."

Pellaeon chose to take small encouragement from that and hurried over to the comm station. Vernedet turned away from Zaarin to tell him, "The smaller ship is still in the air. It's been leading them on a chase through the mountains and they've already lost seven fighters."

"The TIE was designed for space combat, not atmospherics and certainly not storms," Zaarin said, blustering but defensive.

"Then perhaps we should send *other* fighters," Pellaeon said. "We still have Eta-2s and ARC fighters onboard."

Zaarin's lips twisted unpleasantly, but he finally acquiesced with a nod.

"Sirs," Vernedet coughed, "We haven't been able to verify the fate of the larger ship."

"You said it flew into the storm," Zaarin said.

"That's right. However, the pursuit vessels going after it crashed, so we don't know if-"

"It landed." Darys appeared suddenly, making all three men jump. Zaarin looked ready to scream at her but she continued, "Another group had disembarked on the surface."

"Are these Jedi too?" Pellaeon asked.

"There are Jedi among them."

Altis's people, coming to evacuate their friends. It was the only explanation, and that meant it was more likely than ever that Hallena was down there, and other men and women who had saved Pellaeon's ship, crew, and life at JanFathal.

It had been years since he'd seen them but he could remember their faces: wise gray Djinn Altis, sprightly green-eyed Ash Jarvee, beautiful Callista who'd somehow melded minds with *Leveler*'s gunnery computer. None of them had been part of Yoda and Windu's uprising; none of them deserved to die.

If any of those Jedi were down there on Belsavis, he would mourn, and if Hallena was down there-

"Captain Pellaeon," Darys interrupted his thoughts, "Please prepare a shuttle, two commando squadrons, and a fighter escort."

He blinked. "For what purpose?"

She raised an eyebrow, like the answer should have been obvious. "I have my mission, as you have yours."

Pellaeon looked out the viewport again, at that desolate ice-ball of a planet that had suddenly become the centerpoint of his life. Then he looked at Darys and said, "Your mission is my mission. I'm coming with you."

She didn't react, but Vernedet did. "Captain, I *strongly* advise you to-"

"Lieutenant Vernedet, you have the bridge." He didn't take his eyes off Darys' own, white rings over black. "We depart in fifteen minutes."

Rain was falling hard into the valley, but it still hadn't put out the fires from the wrecked freighter sitting outside the crumbled walls to Master Plett's compound. It made the earth slippery and we could feel it rattling on the roofs of our helmets; at least, those of us who had helmets, which was everyone except for Maze and the three Jedi, who

contented themselves with black plasteel armor and comlinks nestled inside to one ear.

Zey, Ash, and Nor Vald had lightsabers ignited, and rain sizzled on their burning blades. The light from their weapons helped illuminate the blaster-scorched wreckage left by the collapsed dome. It only took a quick survey for us to tell that there were no bodies to be seen. I could feel, just barely, the panicked presence of many people in the Force. The other Jedi could as well, Zey most of all, and he led us into the base of the half-toppled wooden tower.

The explosions that had brought the tower down had also dislodged what we realized had once been a hidden door. Zey, saber blazing, led the way down the dark, narrow stone staircase, with Maze right behind him, DC rifle up, stock braced against his shoulder like the commando he was created to be. Those of us with helmets turned our night vision on, while the Jedi lit their own way with sabers that no longer hissed and popped in the rain. Mine dangled at my belt, clanging against my hip, and I barely noticed it. The Verp rifle in my hands felt good and natural, and a little part of me was glad that I was still thinking like a *Mando* after everything that had happened.

At the bottom of the staircase there were tunnels, unlit and carved through black rock. Prudii, Mereel, and Corr fired up the directional lights attached to their rifle-scopes, and the rest of us with *buy'ce* turned off the night vision. It only took a minute of tentative exploring to realize that the entire complex was a massive tangle of caverns, and with no map we were stuck.

Well, *I* was stuck anyway, because even when I reached out with the Force all I could sense was distant anxiety.

Zey was better than me. He stabbed a finger down one tunnel and said, “There's someone down there. I can feel it.”

“I feel something this way,” Ash pointed down another path.

Mereel's long sigh scratched over his helmet speakers. "What's it gonna be, *jetii*?"

"If these caves are as big as they seem to be, we might be dealing with multiple groups," Atin said.

Ash said, "I have a friend here, Margolis. I know what she feels like in the Force. She's down this way, I know it."

"How far down?" Maze asked.

"The Force isn't clear like that," I told him and looked at Ash. "Are you sure it's your friend?"

"I am."

"Then one team follows Ash. Another team follows Zey."

"How do we meet up again?" Corr asked.

There was an awkward silence. Nor Vald said, "Ash and I can connect through the Force. We'll find each other."

"Jetii sonar ain't good enough," Mereel said.

"It'll have to be," I said, right before the tunnel started shaking. It wasn't enough to knock us off our feet or even dislodge anything heavy from the ceiling, but it did send a hell of a scare through all of us. Even the best *beskar'gam* can't protect you when a whole mountain collapses on your head.

"Another bombardment," Maze suggested. "Either they're firing from orbit, or more fighters broke through."

"If that destroyer's pounding us we'd be dead by now," Prudii said.

"Any chance we can call Fi or Kom'rk?" Nor Vald asked.

Mereel checked his comlink, but I didn't even bother. "We're too deep. There's too much interference."

"It doesn't matter," Zey snapped. "We need to get moving. There's no time to waste."

"I'll go with you," Nor Vald stepped over to join Maze and my old master.

I froze for a moment, staring at the harsh blue glow of his lightsaber and the determination it carved onto his grizzled face. I had my *buy'c* on, but he stared right back at me.

Then Zey said, “Bardan, go with Ash. Two Jedi per team.”

At any other time, I'd have objected at being called a Jedi. I'd have refused his orders and gone marching off with him out of my stupid contrarian stubbornness. But that time I just nodded and stepped over to Ash's side.

And so we divvied up: Ash, Atin, Corr, Mereel, and myself in one group. In the other: Zey, Nor Vald, Maze, and Prudii. Slightly lopsided, but we didn't have time to finagle.

“Okay,” Mereel called, “Form columns! Sonar *jetii* up front, other saber-jockeys in the back! Light-boys, right behind the sonar. *Oya!*”

Ash and Mereel started down their tunnel; so did Zey and Nor Vald. Before he disappeared, before Prudii swung his light-beam toward the tunnel ahead, I caught my old master's eye one last time.

He nodded, very slightly. I nodded too. Then I turned away from him, away from Maze and Prudii and that Jedi I'd just met, and followed Atin down the tunnel.

I was still in *Mando* mode then, and I took the cold feeling in my gut for an irrational anxiety, but when I look back on it now, I think the Force was talking to me then, telling me that I was never going to see any of them again.

The second A'Sharad Hett dropped out of hyperspace, he found himself staring at the giant blue blaze of a star destroyer's engines. He wrestled the Headhunter's joystick to his chest and veered sharply upward. Stars swept by overhead, the destroyer's blue blaze fell away, and his fighter managed to skim over its hull without even triggering its proximity sensors.

Then he remembered Hallena Devis, dropping out of lightspeed right beside him in her clunky Corellian YT-model freighter *Ince*.

“*Ince*, are you there?” he called into his headset. “*Ince,* respond!”

"Right here, flyboy," her voice sounded.

He looked one way, then another, before he finally spotted the white line of the freighter's engines burning at a ten o'clock position. He rolled port just before the star destroyer started letting loose with her guns. She was firing turbolasers, big heavy green bolts, but he was a small target and Devis was far enough away to avoid them.

"Flyboy, I'm gunning for the planet."

"Copy. I'm on your tail."

Hett gunned the Headhunter's engines. He checked his rear scanners and didn't see any fighters launched yet, but that could have meant anything.

He and Devis plunged their ships toward the white planet below. Atmospheric entry burned and buffeted their ships, but soon they were soaring through clouds. Hett checked his scanners again; the destroyer was finally launching fighters.

"Any idea where we're going, *Ince*?"

"I got the coordinates from Djinn. We're heading straight for them."

"Talk to your pals?"

"I'm putting a call in. If anybody's listening-"

"And if they're not?" Before Devis could answer he spotted something on his forward scanners. "I have fighters up ahead. See them?"

"I- wait, I see them. Those eyeball things from before."

He gave his fighter an extra nudge, pushing it ahead of the freighter. "I bet they don't dance in air like they do in space."

"They'd better not."

They seemed to pop out of the white expanse of snow: a half-dozen little spheres, flanked by flat solar panels, spewing green lasers and howling like Krayt dragons. Hett put power to his forward shields and sprayed red laser blasts at the attackers. The fighters immediately broke formation and started to swarm around the big, clunky target that Devis' ship presented.

Hett pulled a hard port to chase one target. Sunlight spilled into his eyes, blinding him for a moment, and when vision returned a fighter was charging him head-on. His finger slammed the trigger and lasers pierced the ball cockpit and detonated it. Gravity pulled the flaming sphere and two panels downward to the surface and Hett soared through the spot they had been a second ago; if they'd been dogfighting in space he'd have perished with his kill.

Hett spun around to see three more fighters chasing *Ince*. The freighter had automated turret guns, but they couldn't track like flesh-and-blood gunners. Thankfully, the pilots didn't seem to see him coming as he swept down from above. Two bursts of fire brought down two fighters. The other one tried to snap and roll away, but its big six-sided solar panels brought heavy wind resistance. Hett popped off one more round of lasers, clipped one panel, and sent the fighter into a death-spiral.

"Nice shooting, flyboy," Devis told him.

"Not a problem. Any talk-back?"

"I got something."

"*Something* what?" He checked his scanners. A full squad of fighters were entering the atmosphere.

"Hold on-"

Her transmission cut off, but the ship kept flying level, high over the snowfields. A massive mountain range, capped by black storm-clouds, was fast approaching. Hett felt faint anxiety; there were Jedi somewhere ahead, but they were going to need something specific from Devis's contacts.

"Okay," her voice suddenly sounded, "I've got it! There's a hangar built into the side of the mountain. They've got refuse there but they only have one blastboat and over twenty people-"

"Sounds like a job for you. Got coordinates?"

"I do. They're dead ahead."

"Fantastic. I'll keep those fighters off your back, then we'll find a way to punch past that-"

His fighter suddenly rocked under the impact of hot plasma against his shields. He checked his scanners and saw that full squad of fighters had plunged out of orbit faster than he'd expected.

"Flyboy, they're coming in fast!"

"I noticed!" he snapped and tried to hop through the air as nimbly as his Headhunter could. "Go for the hangar! I'll cover!"

"There's a full dozen there!"

A dozen to one was awful odds for anyone, even an ace pilot and Jedi Master. He thought about the children down there, about Syne, about all the dead Jedi he'd fought beside and about his dead father most of all: Slain by an assassin's gun under Tatooine's two suns while fighting a hopeless battle against an unstoppable enemy.

He'd always wanted to be like his father, but he'd never wanted to end like him. Someone, maybe Quin Vos, had told him the universe didn't care what you wanted, it gave you what *it* wanted.

"Go ahead." His throat scraped. "I'll hold them off."

Then he pulled his ship into a hard right loop. Four fighters broke starboard to pursue; the other six chased the freighter. He only hoped he could down the six before the four downed him.

"Another one, dead ahead," Devis called as he settled on the backs of the fighters.

The other four were wheeling around to catch him. He checked his scanners; another ship was coming toward *Ince* head-on but it read as different from the Imp fighters.

A new voice rattled in his ear: "Dive! Dive now!"

He pushed his nose down. So did Devis. A spray of red laser blasts it up two Imp fighters, then another, while the others broke formation. Hett pulled his fighter back upward and saw the boxy form of a large starfighter whip past overhead.

"Identify yourself!" he called.

"Identify *yourself*," the man retorted.

Hett had heard that voice countless times before, but never like this. Whoever that clone was, he wasn't flying for the Empire.

"We're here to rescue Master Plett!" Devis called. "They're trying to evac through a hangar on the mountainside but they need a ship!"

"Looks like that's your job, *cyar'ika*."

"Are you Skirata's people?" Devis asked.

"I'm Kom'rk, I got A'den with me. Who're you?"

"Hallena Devis. I met a couple of your boys- Jusik and Fi."

"*Shab*, they're down there now. Fi's got another ship, *Bard'ika*'s in the tunnels."

"I'll get 'em home. Count on it."

Hett had no idea what was going on, but the fighters were regrouping fast.

"Unidentified ship," he called, "We need to hit those squadrons!"

"Agreed. *Ad'ika*, get our boys home!"

"You got it. I'll see you on the other side."

Ince lurched forward. Hett wheeled to face the oncoming fighters and the boxy Aggressor fighter dropped onto his flank. Hett put full power to his forward shields and said, "I'll take the ones breaking starboard, you take port."

"Copy that."

Green energy splattered on their shields and rocked their vessels. Hett fired off a round of lasers and took out one fighter but the others scattered. The clones' ship broke port, he broke starboard. He clipped the wing of one fighter and chased two more higher into the atmosphere. The white glow of sunlit snow faded and stars peeked through thinning air.

He knew he had to catch the fighters before they escaped the atmosphere that was inhibiting their agility. He pumped out another round of shots, tearing off a fighter's port solar panel and sending it into a death-spiral. The force of its momentum spun it out of the atmospheric envelope, out

into airless space, where it would probably keep spinning until the man inside ran out of oxygen and suffocated in his spherical tomb.

Whoever designed those fighters, Hett decided, had to view pilots with contempt.

He dropped his targeting reticule on the other fighter right before a series of last blasts buffeted his aft shields. He swore, broke off pursuit, and rolled through the thin atmosphere to face the oncoming fighters. There were two of them, firing like mad, and this time their shots punched through his shields. Alarm klaxons wailed in his cockpit and one of his engines started to stutter.

He was saved by his mysterious friends. The clones' ship picked off one fighter, then another. The third one, the one Hett had been trailing, had escaped the atmosphere and was cutting a fast retreat toward the long gray dagger hanging above them.

"You okay, barve?" the clone pilot, Kom'rk, called.

"Just fine," Hett scowled.

He killed power to the stuttering engine, waited a moment, and started again. His fighter shook but didn't break, and he pulled alongside the clones' fighter as they soared toward the stars and the enemy destroyer. A red light still flashed inside his cockpit: atmosphere levels dropping. He looked around the transparisteel frame of his cockpit and couldn't see any fractures, but they must have been there. He snapped his helmet's breathing mask in front of his nose and mouth and made sure it was vacuum-sealed against his face.

"Look alive," Kom'rk called. "More bad guys coming in."

Hett saw them: two boxy assault shuttles, flanked by one full squads of those new fighters and another dozen ARC-170s.

And then he felt them.

The same cold presence that had touched his mind over Farstine caressed it again. It felt like cold fingers trailing

along his scalp; he thought he heard whispers, but had no idea what they were saying.

Then Kom'rk said, loud and clear, “Oh *shab*, they're heading this way! All of them!”

Hett felt strangely detached as he watched all twenty-four starfighters drop away from the assault shuttles and vector toward their two ships.

“We have to stop those shuttles!” he shouted.

“We're about to have full hand, friend!”

“You don't understand, there's a-”

His ship rattled as laser-blasts flared across his shields. He broke off with the clones' fighter but that didn't do any good. The ARC fighters let loose proton torpedoes, and Hett frantically gunned toward the stars. Torps trailed spirals of red exhaust as they homed in on his engines, and just when his proximity alarms started wailing he killed all power to thrusters. His craft shuddered and three torpedoes shot far ahead. Hett watched until their red contrails thinned and died, then checked his scanners.

The moment's elation collapsed. The small new fighters swarmed around the clones' ship like gnats, while the bigger ARC-170s fired off a new volley of torps. Hett kicked in his good engine and spun a sharp heel-turn to face the shining white planet, and the clones' last fight.

He knew he couldn't get there in time. Their ship took the first torpedo head on, and an explosion rippled across their shields. The next torp tore through the shield and punched into the engine casing. There was a second's delay before the thrust engines ignited spectacularly. The cockpit pod snapped off from the ship's main body and started falling toward the planet, but a couple nimble little fighters dove and tore it to pieces with a rain of green laser-blasts.

As it fell toward the atmosphere, sure to burn up, the tumbling wreckage of the clones' ship passed two Imp assault shuttles, unhurt and still on-target.

Red anger surged inside A'Sharad Hett. It was the kind of rage that only lasted for seconds, and only came at truly

awful moments: his father's death, the death of his padawan Bhat Jul during the war, Order 66.

He fired up his second engine and charged toward the planet, the shuttles, the swarms of fighters. More proton torpedoes raced toward him. He gave his thrusters an extra kick and raced to meet his death.

Then his crippled engine exploded. His fighter was thrown into a spin so fast his helmet cracked against the transparisteel of his cockpit. His neck stung from whiplash and he struggled to get his fighter under control but his stick seemed to wrench from his hand. Belsavis, the shuttles, the fighters were gone. Only black space and tiny stars filled his viewport.

Proximity alarms wailed. Somehow he thought to reach for the ejection lever. His hand found it and pulled. He shot out into space a moment before the torpedoes hit his fighter and detonated. The force of the explosion flung him far from the debris and into the all-embracing blackness between stars.

17

"A galaxy without real heroes would be a sorrier place, but you shouldn't envy heroes and you shouldn't try to be one either. Heroes are on the front line of every battle. Heroes are the ones making sacrifices. Heroes are the ones who die."

The glaring spotlight attached to Prudii's rifle-barrel painted bright white over the rocky tunnel walls. The two Jedi followed right behind the armored Mandalorian, using their mysterious Force-powers to point the way whenever the tunnels branched, leaving Maze to bring up the rear.

He didn't know how long they wandered through the tunnels for, but eventually Prudii threw up a hand, silently calling for them to halt. He dropped to one knee and killed his spotlight. Absolute blackness descended on the tunnel.

"Hold the light-swords," Prudii whispered as Maze knelt to the ground and clasped his DC-17 to his chest. His free hand lightly touched the cold igneous rock; he kept both heels off the ground and both legs primed to spring into action.

"I sense someone up ahead," Nor Vald said. "It feels friendly, almost... familiar..."

"I'm switching to IR. Stay where you are. I'll scout ahead."

Maze heard the slight slap of Prudii's boots on rock as he advanced, probably still at a crouch. The tunnel was absolutely black; there was no light whatsoever for his

eyes to adjust to. For the first time in a long while, Maze found himself missing his old helmet.

He heard one of the Jedi reset his footing a meter ahead, but nobody talked. After less than a minute of drawn-out silence, Prudii's voice echoed through the cavern.

"Clear!" he said, and a blue saber brought back the light.

Maze and Nor Vald followed Zey around two more curves before they reached a round chamber with a low stone ceiling. It seemed to be a storage room, bare except for piles of crates, but then Maze saw something white bobbing behind a two-meter-high stack.

"Master Plett?" Zey called, "Is that you?"

A reedy white-haired Ho'din stepped out from behind the crate. He was wearing black Jedi robes but Maze didn't see a lightsaber. He might have been like Kina Ha, too old for the saber-swinging. If this was *the* Master Plett, he couldn't fathom why the founder of this settlement was hiding alone in some storage room when the rest of his people were elsewhere.

Then two children popped out from behind him, one boy and one girl, both pale-skinned and black-haired. Plett placed a big green hand on the girl's head as she clung tightly to the spread of his robes.

"Lagan! Roganda!" Nor Vald said. "Thank the Force you're all right!"

"What's going on?" the boy, probably Lagan, asked. "Master Plett says we're being attacked."

"There's a star destroyer in orbit. They've been launching fighter wings," Zey looked directly at Plett.

"I know," the Ho'din said. "They destroyed our escape ship before we knew what was happening."

"Was that *Wookiee Gunner*?" Nor Vald asked. "Geith and Callista's ship?"

Plett nodded. "They were not inside. They took a Y-wing to scout the Moonflower Nebula. We heard there was a battle station that might have been hiding there, not a star destroyer."

"Master Altis got a signal from Callie, saying they'd found the battle station," Nor Vald said. "It's how we knew to come here. Didn't you get it?"

"We received no warning. We were about to move people into the freighter anyway, but then the fighters came. We had to flee to the tunnels. Have you heard anything else from-"

"Nothing," Nor Vald said grimly. "But if the battle station's *not* in orbit, well, maybe they didn't die for nothing."

"Listen," interjected Prudii, "Catch-up is important, but we need to get our *shebs* out of here."

"Agreed," said Maze. "Master Plett, you said you had a Y-wing. Do you have more ships somewhere?"

"We have a hidden hangar that opens out onto a mountain-side. Margolis was taking the other children there but Roganda and Lagan got separated."

"It was *her* fault!" Lagan pouted at his sister.

Maze ignored them both. "What kind of ships?"

"Not much. A blastboat and another Y-wing. Not enough to evacuate."

"Good thing we brought Fi," Prudii said. "Let's find that hangar. Once we get there we can call him and *Kom'ika* so they can pick us up."

"That sound excellent," Zey said. "Master Plett, can you get us to the tunnels?"

"Of course." He reached down and took Roganda and Lagan by the hand. "Come, children, we have to hurry."

Maze kept a frown off his face. One old Ho'din and two little kids weren't going to move very fast. He trusted Prudii and the two other Jedi would be good in a fight, but civvy protection ops had always been a pain.

Prudii turned his spotlight back on and pointed it toward the tunnel. "Okay, fall out. Master Plett, lead the way. Maze, Zey, you take rear guard."

"Copy." Maze said. He watched as Prudii stalked forward into the dark, followed by the one old Jedi

dragging two kids. Nor Vald followed them, saber lit, and for a second Zey's eyes met Maze's and neither of them moved.

Then Zey inclined his head in a tiny nod and turned to follow. As ordered, Maze brought up the rear. They plunged back into the tunnels together.

The debris strewn over the remains of the Jedi settlement made it impossible for the assault shuttles to set down, so instead they kicked their repulsorlifts on, hovered at the lowest altitude possible, and dropped their landing ramps.

Both shuttles were packed to the brim with clone troopers in white armor, and the wind and rain didn't bother them a bit. The only ones without protection were Pellaeon and Darys, and he guessed the Inquisitor wouldn't be much phased by adverse climate.

All he had was his grey captain's uniform and his sidearm pistol, but he charged down the ramp anyway. The first round of attacks by the TIE fighters had thoroughly savaged to settlement. The dome had been shattered, the tower crumbled, and the escape vessel destroyed where it sat. As they walked through the debris Pellaeon scanned charred and rain-soaked plants and realized he was looking at what had been a cultivated garden. Gardens had always been a soft spot of his (Hallena had thought they spoke to his hidden aesthetic sensibilities, but it was probably just his need to micromanage) and it pained him to see this one so thoroughly ruined.

At least there were no bodies.

Darys cut a straight line through the wreckage, sometimes lashing out with her red lightsaber to cut down a tall stalk or sloping branch that was in her way. The troopers formed a white column behind her and Pellaeon hurried past them, boots squishing and sliding through mud and ash, until he caught up with her, just as she stood at the entry to the collapsed tower.

He didn't see what could be inside there now, but he was glad to follow her out of the rain. He took off his rain-soaked cap, slapped it against his thigh a few times to get some of the water off, and asked her, “Do you feel any Jedi nearby?”

She angled her lightsaber toward one wall, and its red glow illuminated a doorway. Pellaeon stepped closer and saw a darkened stairwell winding downward.

“This settlement is probably the tip of the iceberg,” he told her. “They probably have miles of tunnels beneath us, probably thick with traps. We should call for reinforcements.”

He just wanted to stall for time. He didn't know if that counted as treason but at the moment he didn’t care.

Darys didn't seem to hear him. She held her saber in front of her and used it as a guide as she started down the steps. Pellaeon grimaced, looked back at the armored soldiers crammed into the doorway, and waved them forward. He was the first to follow Darys down the well.

It didn't take them long to find a place where the tunnel split in two. A few clone troopers brought up the spotlights on their DC rifles, revealing the winding courses ahead. Darys stood at the crossroads, probably feeling ahead on each path with her Force powers.

There was nothing Pellaeon could do right now and he knew it. He could only follow Darys and hope that if she found Hallena, or Altis, or Callista, then he could-

-could what? Shoot an Inquisitor in the back? Even if he pulled it off it would still be treason against the Empire, the abandonment of all the principles of service he'd committed himself to his entire career.

But if he just stood back and *witnessed* a slaughter, it would be even worse.

“Captain,” she said, “Split your forces. One squadron on the right path, one on the left.”

“Understood.” Pellaeon put his hands in the air and flashed directional signals to the troops. Like the good men

they were, they split into orderly halves and started down the tunnels with rifles and spotlights pointed forward.

"I will go this way." Darys tilted her sabertip to the right tunnel.

"I'll stay with you," Pellaeon said.

She didn't seem to hear that either. She simply started walking. As he strode after her he carefully unclipped his pistol from its hip holster. He didn't know what he was going to use it for, but when the time came, he would.

He didn't need any Force to tell him that.

As we wound through the tunnels I started to feel, with increasing clarity, the presence of a group of Force-users ahead. Sometimes, when we came to forks in the path (and there seemed to be an infinity of them), I would point out the correct one even before Ash did. I realized quickly that we were going to need the Force to get off Belsavis alive, and I willfully shed a bit of my mental *Mando* toughness and let the old Jedi part of me come to the fore. It was easier than I thought it would be.

I don't know how long it took us but we found them eventually. They were clustered in a room that looked like a garden. Artificial light shone down like a false sun on multi-colored plants from different corners of the galaxy, and crammed into this surprising underground haven were over twenty small children, all of them radiating fear through the Force, and a handful of adult handlers who seemed just as scared. I spotted a tall female Ho'din, but I got nothing from her in the Force and knew she wasn't Master Plett.

Ash, meanwhile, ran up to a tall blond woman with an Ithorian child clinging to her skirts.

"Oh, Margolis!" she said, "You're okay! You're all okay!"

"Ash! How did you find us?"

"How do you think?" Ash gave her a firm hug. "Is this all of you?"

"Where's Master Plett?" I asked.

The Margolis woman stared at me. To her I probably looked like another Mandalorian thug, but then her eyes dropped to my lightsaber and got even wider.

"He's a friend of Djinn," Ash told her. "They all are. They're getting us out of here."

"Where is Plett?" I repeated.

"We were trying to get the kids to the hangar," Margolis said. "A couple got lost- Istar's kids- and Master Plett went back to get them."

She gestured to the second entrance to the garden-room. I reached out with the Force and tried to sense someone down the tunnel, but I felt nothing, and from her expression, neither did Ash.

"You have a hangar?" Mereel interjected.

"It's hidden. It opens up on the mountainside," the Ho'din said as she gathered a human and a Bothan child in her long arms.

Mereel spun on Margolis. "Can you get us there?"

She nodded. "We were just taking a breather."

"Well, breather's over. Let's go."

"We don't have a ship!"

"We do," I said, "We need to go. *Now*."

As the Ho'din started herding the kids into the tunnel, Ash said, "We still don't have Master Plett, or those kids."

"They'll find their way," Mereel grunted. "Come *on*."

"*Mer'ika*," I said, "They could get captured."

"So could Prudii. *Jetii*, can you call your buddy and tell him to meet us?"

Ash frowned. "It's not that easy, but I can try. Master Plett, and those children- I *know* those children. Their mother's *dead*. I promised her. I'd look after them.

Mereel's curse was muted by his helmet speaker. Before I could say anything, Atin interjected. "We can recce the tunnels, me and Corr. We'll see if we can find him. You two get to the hangar and call Fi."

"You'll get lost," Mereel said.

"I'll stay with them," said Ash.

I hated splitting up the party, but I knew I'd never convince Ash to abandon Plett and those kids. I wasn't crazy about leaving Maze, Zey, and Prudii either.

"Okay," I said, "But don't take two long. Ten minutes, tops, and if you don't find them, head back and find us."

"Deal. I'll try to find Nor Vald and the others." Ash put a hand on my forearm. I felt her prod me with the Force and realizing she was marking my Force presence like akk dogs pick up each other's scents. Not something we learned at the Temple, but Altis' people were full of surprises.

She took her hand off me and looked at Corr and Atin. "Okay, let's go."

"Oya," Corr said, without enthusiasm. Ash ignited her lightsaber and led them down the hall.

Meanwhile, the kids were already making their getaway, led by the female Ho'din. Mereel, Margolis and I turned and followed.

It took less time than I expected to get to the hangar. It was a wide space with black-rock walls and a metal flight deck twice the size of the one in Kyrimorut. It looked very empty with only one Y-wing and one blastboat on its flick deck. The forward blast doors were closed, but Margolis went straight to the control panel and opened them.

The doors groaned and scraped as they pulled up, revealing broad blue skies and snowfields that were near-blinding in the sun. The children yelped and covered their eyes after being so long in the tunnels, but my helmet visor automatically dimmed to compensate.

Mereel, meanwhile, was already calling Fi, and I could hear it all in my helmet.

"*Aay'han*, do you copy? Are you getting my signal?"

"I get you. Is it *Mer'ika*?"

"Got it in one, Fi. Can you find me? I'm in a hangar on the edge of the mountains."

"I'll be there in a sec, and with company."

I assumed that meant Kom'rk and A'den in the Aggressor fighter, and so did Mereel. He clapped his hands and spun back on the crowd of kids.

"Okay, we've got incoming! Back against the wall, everybody! Back!"

Margolis and the other adults herded the children back toward the door. Less than a minute later *Aay'han* dropped into view, followed by something we weren't expecting: a Corellian freighter. The Aggressor was nowhere to be seen.

The freighter's ramp lowered first. Mereel and I half-charged at the woman who came down. She was dark and striking and I remembered her from a previous meeting with Altis.

"Hallena, isn't it?" I grabbed her hand and shook.

"Bardan Jusik right?"

"Right, and this is my brother Mereel."

"Charmed." Mereel tapped his helmet and made a hat-doffing gesture. "You ready to load?"

"I'm ready too," Fi said as he stepped down *Aay'han*'s ramp.

He had his red-and-gray *beskar* on but his helmet off. A few of the kids made uncomfortable noises at the sight of the clone's face, and I felt another wave of fear come off of them.

It was something I hadn't anticipated and should have. Most of those kids had escaped Order 66 through dumb luck; some might have even seen other Jedi gunned down by clones that should have been their protectors.

I had to focus my attention elsewhere. "Okay. Hallena, we're putting as many kids as we can on your ship. Fi, we've got more people incoming, they'll go with you."

"I was gonna say, you looked short a few. Where's everybody else?"

"Still in the tunnels, picking up stragglers."

"Wait a minute," Mereel said, "Where's the Aggressor? Where's Kom'rk and A'den?"

I didn't need the Force to feel the pain written all over Fi's face. Softly, Hallena said, "I'm so sorry. They were shot down. I lost a friend too."

Mereel froze, absolutely stopped, like he was a tin droid and somebody had flipped his off switch. Nobody touched him, nobody said anything.

Margolis stepped in. "Can we start loading? We-"

Mereel lunged for her, fist raised. I used the Force to throw him back. Fi grabbed him by the shoulders and I used my hands to help restrain him. His legs kicked and his arms flailed and a horrible, barely-human scream wailed from his helmet speakers. Margolis and Hallena backed away, shocked and terrified.

I realized then that the bond I felt with my adopted brothers, even what the Omega boys felt for each other, was nothing like the connection between the Nulls. The six of them had been rescued by *Kal'buir* from some Kaminoan termination chamber. They'd been brothers beyond what even normal clones had, training and working in unison since they were literally one year old.

Sometimes I envied them that innate bond. Now, I could only look at Mereel's masked face with an aching, awful sorrow, knowing as I felt it that it was nothing compared to his own. Outwardly Mereel was one of the most well adjusted of the clones. He could crack jokes, flirt with girls, and be a wise elder to younger clones if he absolutely had to act serious, but deep down he was as broken as any of the Nulls. He showed that when we went into a near-homicidal rage against Ko Sai, and I was afraid losing his *vode* might make him snap again.

"*Mer'ika*, not now," Fi said soothingly, "We need to get out of here."

He wailed again. It was an awful sound and it was scaring the kids even more. I hated doing it, but I reached out with the Force and tried to do something to calm him. I knew I couldn't take the pain away (even the brushes of it I

felt were unbearable) but I could slow his breathing, relax his muscles, use the Force like one of Gilamar's sedatives.

"Let's sit down, *Mer'ika*," Fi said as he helped my move Mereel over to *Aay'han*'s landing ramp.

We tried to lower him gently but he ended up clattering down. He slumped, half-upright, against one strut of the ramp. His fingers twitched and his chestplate rose and fell but he didn't life his head and didn't try to stand.

Mereel was a pathetic sight, but I had to turn my attention away and leave him in Fi's care.

Hallena had grabbed Margolis by the shoulder. "Who else came here? Anyone from *Chu'unthor?*"

"Ash Jarvee," I walked back to them. "And Nor Vald."

"Ash went after Istar's kids," Margolis explained.

"Roganda and Lagan?" Hallena's hand went to the small pistol at her hip. I hadn't noticed it until then.

"You're going after them?" Margolis' eyes went wide.

"Can you fly that freighter?"

"I think so."

"Good. Get it ready. I called some friends right before I landed. There's a star destroyer up there still, but once they arrive they can run interference for you." She turned to Fi. "Wait for them before you run. Got it?"

"We'll wait for you," Fi said, "Right *Bard'ika*?"

"You'd better. I'm going with Hallena."

"Bardan-"

"I've got brothers in there too." And, I thought, Masters.

A frown settled on her face, but she nodded, checked the charge on her blaster, and started for the door. I gave Mereel one last look, then followed after her, praying no more of our brothers would die that day,

The enemy came out of nowhere. Prudii was leading the way through the tunnels, getting directions from Plett at every turn, when the air filled with the zap and whine of laser blasts. Prudii's searching swept up to the ceiling and his body fell back, sparks leaping from his *beskar*

breastplate. Nor Vald spun his blade up to deflect rifle-fire. Zey charged forward, saber blazing, and Maze followed, pushing past Plett and the screaming children.

Spinning sabers bounced lasers through the confined space. A stray shot singer Maze's sleeve as he brought his rifle to bear and fired up ahead. He could make out no forms in the darkness, only rifle-flashes, but that was good enough. He aimed a high and caught one clone trooper with a headshot. Zey lunged forward and cut another across the chest with his saber, pivoted, and sliced another man's head clean off.

Then the tunnel rocked with an explosion. Heavy stones came tumbling from the ceiling; the children screamed. Maze threw both hands over his head but nothing fell. He looked around at bodies huddled or fallen, saw a shaft of dusty light spear across the floor, and realized the ringing in his ears drowned out all sound.

He really, *really* wanted his old helmet back.

He scrambled over to Prudii. The Null had taken a full barrage to his chest, leaving his *beskar* scorched and smoking. Maze slapped his helmet once, twice, before a voice rattled over the speaker grill.

"Leave off, dammit, I'm alive." Prudii's voice sounded beneath the ringing.

"Are you hurt?" His own voice sounded strange, distant, like somebody else was saying it.

"I'm okay," Prudii tried to sit up. "I just- ugh-"

"What is it?" In the blue glow of two lightsabers it was impossible to properly examine his body, but something made his right glove go damp.

"You're bleeding."

"No I'm not. I-"

Maze pressed the spot beneath Prudii's left ribs gently. The man cried out in pain.

Maze slid his shoulder beneath the Null's and tried to lift him. As he staggered to his feet he saw Zey, Jedi robes coated in dust, face marred by a blaster-burn across his

right temple. Despite the wound he looked alert, and he called Prudii's rifle to him with the Force. He threw the spotlight at the pile of rock that separated them from the enemy, then down the winding tunnel from which they'd come.

"Can you get us to the hangar another way?" Zey looked at Plett.

The old Ho'din had pressed the kids against the wall and shielded them with his body. He said, "There is another way, but it will be longer."

They heard something from beyond the rubble, and Maze said, "They're going to break through soon. Let's go."

"Agreed," Nor Vald said.

"All right," Plett nodded, "Children, this way."

The Ho'din bent down and scooped up a kid in either arm. They were getting big but apparently the old Jedi was strong enough. He and Nor Vald led the way, while Zey brought up the rear and Maze helped Prudii stagger along. They could hear the clones working to break through the rubble behind them.

"What brought it down?" Prudii grunted.

Maze looked back at Zey. "Was it you?"

"I didn't think it was safe." The Jedi was almost walking backwards. His lightsaber was up and ready to deflect the moment the troops caught up with them.

"Some *di'kulta* thought grenades were a good idea," Prudii huffed. "Lucky he didn't bring... whole tunnel down on us. Not that it... matters..."

"Shut up," Maze said. "We're getting you back to your brothers."

"Yeah, right, and I'm the emperor's- *guhhh-"*

"What is it?" In the dim light it was impossible to tell, but he thought he saw the sheen of more blood on Prudii's armor.

"Oh, *shab*," he moaned. "That hurts like a-"

"Turn right!" Nor Vald called from up ahead.

Maze did his best to comply, but Prudii's legs were going weak. Even the old Jedi Master, laden down with two kids, was moving at a faster pace.

"Maze."

"What is it?" He was afraid Prudii was going to ask to be slotted, so as not to drag everybody else down.

"I want you to... *uck*... kill as many of those *shabla chakaare* as you can, okay?"

"Kill them yourself," Maze said, relieved. "You and all your *vode* have a lot more killing to do, believe me..."

There was a shuddering in the tunnel behind them, and Zey called, "They've broken through!"

Maze knew there was no way he could haul Prudii and shoot back at the same time. He thought about calling for Nor Vald to come back and help Zey defend, but for all he knew there were more troopers about to head Plett off.

They followed Plett into another storage room, a little bigger than the one they'd found before, with the entrance to another tunnel on the far side of the room. All of these chambers had been dug into volcanic rock and none of them were sealed with proper, lockable blast doors. If they had been, it would have made things a whole lot easier.

"Master Zey," Maze called, "Can you move those crates? Block off the wall?"

"We can do it," Nor Vald said from in front.

As Plett carried the kids through the chamber and into the new tunnel, the Kel Dor Jedi sidled next to Zey. They both lowered their lightsabers and raised their hands and Maze stopped hauling Prudii long enough to look over his shoulder and see those big heavy metal crates lift off the stone floor like they were on repulsors, drift over to the mouth of the old tunnel, and pile up one after another.

"Well *shab*," Prudii muttered. He must have been watching on his helmet's 360-degree scope. "Good trick."

"Wish we could do that," Maze agreed.

"I don't. Don't like them robes and those silly sabers. Give me *beskar* and a Verp any day."

He was joking, but that might just be delirium. Nor Vald jogged ahead after Plett while Zey lagged behind. He started using the Force to move the remaining crates toward the other tunnel mouth.

"Hold up," Maze said, "We gotta get through first."

"I'm almost ready," Zey said as he set one heavy crate down, halfway blocking the entrance but leaving just enough space for Maze and Prudii to squeeze through.

"Y'know," Prudii said, "He's not such a bad guy, Zey."

"I'm touched," the Jedi Master turned his attention to another crate.

"No, I mean it, you're not-"

Another grenade-blast rocked the chamber. Prudii shouted and Zey snapped up his lightsaber and the top crates in the pile tumbled into the chamber and made a sound like thunder. Smoke poured into the room and laser-blasts flared in the smoke.

Maze couldn't make out anything in the chaos but somehow Zey was able to bat lasers back toward the tunnel. Maze tried to drag Prudii toward the exit but the man was heavy and the air was filled with flying death and he knew a round would catch him in the head any second now-

"Maze!" Zey called.

The commando looked back at the Jedi. Lightsaber still high in one hand, Zey motioned with the other. Maze felt his body lift up as though on a gust of air. He clung tight to Prudii and the heels of their boots scrapped across the stone as Zey pushed them toward the exit.

They skirted the edge of the crate just as a laser blast whipped past Zey's lightsaber and caught him in the side of the head. For a second he froze there, sword still blazing against a backdrop of smoke flashing with laser-light. Then he crumpled dead on the floor.

Maze screamed. He hurled himself and Prudii both over the edge of the crate and behind it. He pulled the DC rifle off his shoulders and started firing into the haze. He couldn't even see targets but he kept firing.

Somehow, Prudii pulled himself upright, threw his elbows on top of the crate, and started shooting with a pistol.

"Get the *shab* out," Prudii said, "Go!"

"I'm not leaving-" he couldn't finish the sentence. He couldn't process, couldn't think. Prudii was a goner and knew it. Zey was already dead, *Zey*. Zey, who made the caf every morning in the office. Zey, who'd sat at his desk fully expecting Maze to plug him in the chest.

Zey, who'd been the center of Maze's brief life, even when he didn't want to be.

"Where's the other *jetii*?" Prudii called over the sound of laserfire.

"I don't know. Went ahead."

"Good." Prudii took one hand off his pistol and grabbed a grenade. "Get out. I'm bringing the house down."

Maze knew there was no point in arguing. "Can you give me thirty seconds to get clear?"

"Anything you want, *ner vod."*

He wondered if the Null was being cheeky in his final moments, if it was a reflex, or if he really saw Maze as a brother, right here, right now, as they faced death in some miserable tunnels on some frozen planet they'd never even heard of a day ago.

In the end, it didn't matter.

"Thirty seconds," he said.

"You got-"

A laser cut low across the top of the crate and caught Prudii in the head. The blast glanced off his *beskar* helmet and sizzled into a wall but he fell back and the grenade rolled out of his hand to the other side of the tunnel mouth.

Maze swore and lunged over Prudii's body. He reached out and grabbed it as lasers flew through gap between crate and rock wall. One blast singed his arm but he held tight. As he reared up and pulled back another shot slipped between the plates of his body-armor and stabbed sizzling agony through his ribcage into his lungs.

Maze fell back. He landed right next to Prudii, face-up, watching lasers soar through the empty overhead space and flash across the tunnel's jagged stone. Breathing hurt; *everything* hurt. But at least he still had the grenade.

Beside him, Prudii rattled, “You still there?”

Maze couldn't speak. Simply breathing was agony. He clasped the grenade tight in his hand and held it as high up as he could, high enough for Prudii to see it, if he could still see anything at all.

Something shook in the Null's chest; an appreciative chuckle or a death-rattle, Maze would never know.

The laser-blasts above him stopped. He thumbed the detonator and waited. White helmets appeared over him and men stared down at a face just like their own.

They killed because they were made for it. He fought because he *chose* to. In the end, that made a difference. It had to.

His thumb slipped, and choice was all.

Once, when he'd been fresh out of the Judiciary Academy, Gilad Pellaeon had worked with a local law enforcement unit on Selonia to track down an underground glitterstim manufacturing facility. The anti-spice police had used a pair of trained akk dogs to find the facility, and being a hands-on officer, Pellaeon had gone down with them through the sewers as the sniffer akks led them unerringly through dark tunnels until they found the facility.

It was bizarre that the memory should come back after all these years, but there was nothing else he could compare Ameesa Darys to. She never said a word and never slower her pace. She just kept marching through the tunnels, red saber glowing in front of her, and when she came to a fork in the path she never hesitated before making her choice.

For all Pellaeon and his dozen clone commandos knew, they could have been halfway to the planet's core by now.

Suddenly his sniffer dog stopped. He had to throw up his arms to keep the troops behind him from running into each

other. Without warning, Darys's red blade receded to nothing. The clones had infrared and night vision in their helmets, and Darys had her magic Force powers, but Pellaeon was stuck in the black.

He heard running feet kick off from Darys's position and held his hand up to keep the clones from following. He turned around and, trusting there was a trooper somewhere nearby, said, "Soldier, do you have a torch?"

A disembodied voice replied, "On my scope, sir."

"Good man. Light it up and advance."

"Very good, sir."

Pellaeon spun around and covered his eyes before catching an eyeful of white light. The spotlight hit him in the back and cast his silhouette, surrounded by a circle of light, across the tunnel wall.

Then he heard the sound of a lightsaber up ahead. No, two lightsabers, crashing and crackling against each other.

"Forward!" he called, but the troops were already in motion.

He ran with them, right alongside the sergeant with the spotlight. They only went through two turns before they found a straight-away lit up by flashing blues and reds. He saw Darys fighting an alien Jedi, a Kel Dor, in the narrow confines of the tunnel. Their lightsabers collided and broke apart, sometimes slicing through the cavern walls and leaving narrow smoking lines behind. Pellaeon held his hand up to keep the clones from firing, then wondered if he damned well *shouldn't* stop them.

But no, these were Jedi. They could bat back any barrage and turn an entire tunnel-full of soldiers to smoking rags.

Behind the flashing swords he saw another figure, a tall Ho'din. It was clutching two objects to its chest; children.

Children. That was what they'd been sent to Belsavis to slaughter. It was too much. It was *far* too much.

The Ho'din turned up the tunnel which it had come down. There was no point in trying a shot; the path was blocked by a light-show of spinning, hissing, spitting Jedi swords.

Then, all of a sudden, it stopped. The Kel Dor staggered; its lightsaber dropped from its hands and shut off. Darys stood over it with red sword still in hand. The Kel Dor clutched its chest with one hand and turned its head up to look Darys in the face.

She flicked her wrist, and its head dropped to the tunnel floor with a wet *crunch*.

Darys shut off her lightsaber. She bent over and laid her spare hand over the Kel Dor's decapitated head, almost caressing it.

Pellaeon didn't even think about approaching until she stood up straight and turned to him.

"More Jedi are getting away," she said. "Come!"

At least it's not Hallena. He told himself that over and over as he waved the clones troops to follow. He could only pray she wasn't in the tunnels at all, because if she *was*, there was probably no one who could stop the hungry sniffer akk on her trail.

Certainly not one Force-deaf captain with just a sidearm.

They made it to the next curve in the tunnel before everything started shaking. Pellaeon was thrown into a wall. There was an awful noise, like the mountain itself was groaning in pain. Rocks came falling and he threw his arms over his head, for all the good that would do. He heard the cries of a few clones but dust filled his vision.

Then the rumbling stopped. He looked behind him and saw massive boulders blocking the path through which they'd come. He counted the white-armored bodies and saw only eight. His gut sunk with the knowledge that three men had probably been crushed in the cave-in.

Up ahead, Darys was using her Force powers like a fist, punching at the rocks that had blocked their other route. One boulder rolled to the tunnel floor; another crumbled like it was made of dirt, not black stone.

"Miss Darys!" Pellaeon called, "Be careful! You might destabilize the mountain! There's no telling-"

The tunnel shuddered again and Pellaeon braced one hand against the wall, but this time no rocks fell. Darys Force-pried one more stone free, revealing another stretch of tunnel beyond. She pushed her head and shoulders through, look around, then pulled back into Pellaeon's section of the tunnel.

"Go left," she said, then threw her whole body through the gap.

It was all Pellaeon could do to keep from swearing. He ran up to the still-piled boulders and looked ahead. The path split into two branches, and he saw the red echo of her lightsaber bobbing down the right one.

He looked back at the clones, picking themselves up, dusting off their armor and checking each other for damage. As to the grief they must have been feeling at the death of three comrades, none of it showed through the faceless masks of their helmets.

"Gentlemen, we're going forward," he called.

They didn't respond, not even with a nod, but the good soldiers obeyed. They crawled with him through the gap, deeper into the black mountain.

I was able to navigate the black tunnels and lead Hallena back to the garden room where we'd left Atin, Corr, and Ash behind. I don't think it was the Force that time; I think it was, rather, good old-fashioned memory and sense of direction.

Once we went past the garden and up the new tunnels, it was a lot harder. I reached out with the Force and tried to find Ash's presence; sometimes I thought I felt some kind of distress, other times cold determination, and I wasn't sure if I was sensing the thoughts of the same being or two different ones.

I got enough of a prickly, anxious sensation to pull my lightsaber off my belt. I didn't ignite it, but I slung my Verp rifle over-shoulder and plucked the smaller Czerka from my hip-holster, so I'd be ready for anything.

"You feel something?" Hallena asked. I had to remind myself that she spent a lot of time around Force-users.

"Something," I admitted. "Not sure what. I don't think it's Ash."

Hallena frowned but held her glowrod steady with one hand, painting the tunnel ahead white. "Any children? Scared children?"

"We left plenty of those behind us."

"Your friend, is he going to be okay?"

I didn't know the answer to that. I couldn't give her one. I was about to fumble some response when we heard the snap and hiss of another lightsaber coming to life.

I didn't need to tell Hallena to halt, but she also shut off her light. The tunnel ahead dropped into black, but I detected a faint blue glow.

I switched my helmet to night vision and walked closer. Hallena, smart woman, didn't follow. I walked along the gentle curve of the tunnel until I could make out more clearly the blue light reflecting off volcanic rock.

I turned my own lightsaber on; a shared signal. A moment later Ash came bounding down the corridor, and I was relieved to see Corr and Atin following her.

"Oh, thank the Force you're here!" Ash called, and stopped when she saw Hallena. "When did *you* get here?"

"Just popped in, no need to thank me," she said. "We've got two ships in the hangar, prepped and ready to run. What about Roganda and Lagan? You couldn't find them?"

"And what about Prudii?" I looked at my brothers. "Zey, Maze, anything?"

Their helmets tilted toward Ash and my heart fell. She said, "Nor Vald is dead. I felt it."

"Then the others-"

"I have no idea. But there were tremors at the same time. It was like a whole chunk of tunnels collapsed."

I felt stunned and empty inside. Mereel had raged, but I didn't know what to feel. After all we'd been through, I still

hadn't figured out what Arligan Zey meant to me. I only knew that a critical piece of my life was gone forever.

"We don't know they're gone, *Bard'ika*," Atin said. "We could still keep looking. We-"

"There's no time." My words came without thinking. "We have to get back to the hangar."

"But *Bard'ika*, Prudii is there, and-"

"I *know* who. But we have to go."

"He's right," Hallena said. I hadn't told her anything about Zey but somehow she'd sensed it; there was deep sadness in her eyes.

"Istar's kids are out there too," Ash said, "And Plett. We can't let them capture Plett."

"We don't have a choice. We have to-"

She came out of nowhere, a flashing fan of red-white light. Atin and Corr spun around and raised their rifles. I had a lightsaber in one hand and a pistol in the other and my brain froze with indecision, but there was nothing I could have done.

The woman, all dark robes and skin and braids, pushed Corr and Atin back. Her saber flashed through the air, batting laser blasts back into their *beskar*. I thumbed my lightsaber on, pushed Hallena behind me, and screamed at her to run, but she out of bravery or shock she didn't budge.

Her name, I learned later, was Ameesa Darys. At that moment, she was a nameless monster. She pushed one hand out and threw Corr and Atin back. They knocked into Ash and me and if the clones hadn't been wearing *beskar* they'd have been run through with our lightsabers. The woman bore down on Hallena who stood frozen in her spot, pistol raised in front of her but unable to move.

She wasn't cut down; that was a mercy. Instead Darys grabbed Hallena with the Force and threw her overhead, down into the darkness behind her. We heard a strangled yelp, a hard crack, and nothing.

Ash popped to her feet first, then me. She bounded over the clones, blue saber swinging, but Darys countered her

attacks easily. Suddenly Ash was in the air, dangling, choking, while Darys held her free hand up like she was squeezing the air.

Atin reared to his feet and fired. The dark woman threw Ash into the wall and caught the lasers in her black-gloved hand like they were some kind of springball. Energy smoked, sizzled, and died in her palm.

Then she lunged. Her saber swept horizontally, sneaking between Atin's *beskar* plates and slicing him right above the belt. He stagged and pitched forward; with a flick of the wrist her saber became a vertical line and she shoved it straight up through Atin's chin.

I think I screamed. I can't remember.

Corr, wordlessly, got to his feet and charged, holding his rifle in one hand and firing madly. Darys pulled her saber out of Atin's helmet and, with a flick of her free wrist, threw his body into the air. Corr barely ducked but Atin caught me full-on and I crumbled onto the hard floor. I rolled to one side and strained my neck just in time to see Corr's charge.

He got right in front of her before Darys flicked her wrist up and cut clean through his forearm. Hand and rifle went flying into the wall. She must have expected him to buckle and fall before her in pain, maybe dropping his head low and leaving his neck open for an easy decapitating strike.

She hadn't been counting on a man with two metal arms.

Corr shoved the stub of his wrist into her gut. The sheared-off metal shafts, still super-hot from the lightsaber's blade, burned right through skin and into flesh. The woman screamed as Corr stabbed deeper and twisted. Then there was a flash of blue lightning and Corr went flying back.

I rolled out from under Atin's body. Ash was getting to her feet. Corr was pushing himself off the ground with his good hand, even as blue sparks flickered around his *beskar'gam.*

As for me, I listened to the crackle of blue lightning, heard the ragged angry growls of the wounded woman, and stared into the black T-visor of Atin's helmet, knowing the man inside was dead.

Mandalorians believe the body of the dead is unimportant because the spirit is part of something greater. It's one of the few things we have in common with Jedi.

But we *also* believe the soul and the armor are one. Somehow, I had the presence of mind to wrench Atin's battered, maroon-painted shoulderplate off his body. By then, Darys was starting to rise. Blue lightning sizzled around her hunched body. Corr was already running in the opposite direction. I surged to my feet, grabbed Ash by the shoulder, and pulled her with me as I followed.

We ran without looking back. When we reached the hangar, both freighters had their landing ramps down and engines fired up. Ash sprinted up the belly of Hallena's ship, and Corr and I ran into *Aay'han*.

We found Fi at the helm and Mereel slumped in the co-pilot's seat, helmet still on. I tore mine off and said, "Can we go? Is backup here?"

"Where's Zey?" Fi asked, "Where's *Atin?"*

"Atin's dead," I tossed his shoulderplate in Fi's lap. Fi stared at the plate like he was afraid to touch it and I realized he, too, might be on the verge of a breakdown like Mereel.

"What about Zey?" Fi stuttered. "And Prudii, and Maze, and those other kids-"

"They're gone! Fi, can we go?" I was almost shouting. "Do we have cover?"

He just stared at Atin's armor and couldn't move his hands.

I swore, slipped between his seat and Mereel, and bodily pulled him up by the shoulders.

"Let me fly, *vod'ika*, please," I leaned in close.

Fi's eyes were empty, but he nodded.

"Come on, Fi," Corr slung his good arm over his shoulder. "It's okay. I got the *shabuir*, I got her."

I dropped into the pilot's seat, took one look at Mereel's empty husk next to me, and thumbed the comm. “Ash, are you there?”

“I'm ready, Bardan. Let's get out of here.”

“What about our friends?”

“They're here. We need to go. *Now*.”

I fired up *Aay'han*'s repulsors and pulled up the landing ramp. Hallena's freighter was already pulling out of the hangar. I followed her engine-flare out into the bright blue sky. Our engines roared, but inside the cockpit they were just a muffled drone. None one said a thing.

The vast empty blue filled our viewport and swallowed us all, me and my broken brothers.

He fell into the void, slowly.

Like his dead starfighter, A'Sharad Hett's ejection seat was a no-frills device. It has small directional thrusters, enough for a pilot to jet short distances or spin around in zero gravity. It did nothing for a man stranded far from any ships, friendly or otherwise.

He used the thrusters to angle himself to face Belsavis. Through the lens of his pilot's helmet he watched the snowy planet, the wedge of the star destroyer, and tiny engine-flares of the fighters and assault shuttles that gradually dwindled to nothing in the atmosphere.

Hett fell deeper into the void between stars and watched the white sphere shrink. He was probably tumbling away from them at a rate that beggared the mind, but it seemed to fall away so very, very slowly.

He wondered how much oxygen he had left. He didn't want to know.

He stared at the white sphere until he thought he'd burned it into his retinas. Then he closed his eyes. He counted, one, two, three, all the way to ten, then opened his eyes. The planet had gotten a little smaller. He closed his eyes again and counted to ten. He opened them again. The planet was smaller still.

He closed his eyes and didn't count. He wondered if there was a point to opening them at all. He wondered if he shouldn't unseal his helmet now rather than slowly suffocate while staring at a dwindling world.

He wondered if his father had felt this sensation of utter failure as he lay dying on the desert sands.

He opened his eyes-

-and he sees a man drifting in space. At first he thinks he is the man but the man is not strapped to an ejection seat. The man is dressed in some vacuum suit different from the red flight suit Hett himself wears. The man floats in orbit over a planet, not snow-white but dust-brown. Hett doesn't understand how he is seeing this, but he knows, somehow, it is the Force speaking to him with clarity it's never had before, not after a long life as a Jedi and a-

-he kneels on hot Tatooine sand, staring at the scorched stub of one hand. His father's lightsaber lies beyond him and beyond the lightsaber is the brown hem of a Jedi's robe-

-another man drifts through space, the same man, he knows *it, though this time he wears a different flight suit and he hangs above a blazing star. He sees with eyes not his own and his vision swings around the man; stars pan to the side and the sun falls away and these eyes not his own show him the face behind the vacuum-sealed helmet-glass: a heavy brow, eyes angry and sad at the same time, wide lips pressed tightly together, high cheekbones, tangles of curly blond hair sweat-matted against his forehead-*

-the man is not Anakin but he looks so like him, feels *like him, he can only be a Skywalker-*

A'Sharad Hett opened his eyes.

The planet was even further away. The blackness between stars seemed to wrap around him like an icy embrace. It seemed to easy to die then but his whole awareness raged against it.

The Force had spoken to him as it never had before. It had instilled him with a mission, one he didn't understand,

but a mission nonetheless. He knew the Force spoke to some Jedi that way and envied them that clarity, though he understood now their frustrations about how damned *vague* the Force could be, even when speaking with such a loud voice.

He checked the controls to his ejection seat. He had enough fuel in the thrusters for one more boost. He did a full retro-burn and kicked himself forward, toward the white planet. It started to grow, slowly. He closed his eyes and counted to ten. He opened his eyes and it was bigger. He closed, counted, opened again. A little larger. If he was lucky, very lucky, he might even settle into the planet's orbit.

That way he could at least suffocate looking at something pretty.

Then he saw something; flashes of light. His eyes focused on the distant gray star destroyer and realized it was not alone. It was pumping green turbolaser blasts outward and sparks of explosions sprinkled the surrounding space. He thought he saw the blazing engines of a few big capital ships, but he couldn't be sure. His vision was starting to blur; his oxygen must finally be running low.

Somehow, he was not afraid. He simply waited. The Force had shown him something, something he didn't understand, but it had shown him nonetheless, and he trusted the Force would not kill him now. He closed his eyes and waited.

He was unsurprised when the flashing lights turned his eyelids red. He cracked them open slowly, until he saw a Corellian Corvette, hull painted deep scarlet, shining its forward searchlight in his face.

Hett closed his eyes again and waited to be saved.

18

"On the flight back to Chu'unthor*, our empty ship was full of those we left behind. It seemed impossible that this ship had seemed to crowded on the way to Belsavis, and that hours-old memory made the present intolerable. We couldn't even console each other. We were all brothers, but we were all lost in our private griefs."*

The shuttle dropped out of hyperspace without warning from the pilot. Niner threw mental curse at the Spaarti clone, or whatever he was, an immediately felt bad about it. He'd spent the whole ride out from Farstine stewing angrily inside his helmet and was ready to lash out at anyone.

From his spot between Scorch and Olin, Niner could lean forward a little and see through the forward viewport. He saw the glowing white curve of Belsavis and the pale gray dagger of a single star destroyer.

"Doesn't look like there's action," Scorch observed.

"Could mean anything," Boss said. "Stay ready."

The pilot didn't say anything. He was probably talking to that destroyer inside his helmet. After floating over the planet for close to a minute, the shuttle vectored toward the destroyed and kicked in its engines.

"Can we get a sitrep?" Boss requested over his helmet speakers.

"Command says the battle's already done," the pilot said. "Clean-up is commencing on the ground. We're to report to *Valediction* for further orders."

"Gee, we dress up nice and they won't let us party," Fixer snickered over their helmet comm.

"Well, they'll probably run us back to Farstine next," Scorch said. "They're getting ready for some big op."

"We're supposed to be Jedi-hunters," Kol groused. "Vader's Fist and all that. Somebody else is stealing our action."

"You want to fight a colony of saber-swingers, that's your choice, *ner vod*," Fixer said. "Me, I can't wait to get back to Farstine."

"Yeah, you and your wannabe *Mando* buddies can all pile in the shower together," said Soru.

"Hey, what's *that* supposed to mean?"

Darman suddenly spoke up. "Pilot, can we get an update on the situation on the ground?"

The banter stopped. Niner tensed. After a moment, the pilot said, "Negative. *Valediction* says we'll get sitrep and orders after we land."

"Can we get a captain on the vicstar?" Boss asked.

"One moment." After a pause, the pilot said, "Captain is Gilad Pellaeon."

"Pellaeon," Scorch mused, back on headset again. "Sounds a little familiar."

"Shipped us to Gaftikar once," Niner spoke up.

There was a short pause, like everyone was surprised to hear his voice. He was surprised he'd remembered it.

"He hauled the Five-oh-First once," Joc said. "Start of the war. Had a different ship then, *Leveler*. Lost two brothers on that mission, but Pellaeon, he seemed pretty good. For a mongrel, you know."

Valediction started to fill their viewport. Niner looked to the back of the cabin, where Rede and Darman sat. The Spaarti clone was leaning forward a little to see out the viewport, but Darman was staring dead ahead like a shut-off droid.

He had no idea what had happened on the planet. Something in his gut told him he wouldn't learn a lot once

they got aboard *Valediction*. The only way he was going to learn the real story was if Jaing or Mereel started speaking in his ear. It could happen any time.

He wouldn't take his helmet off until it did. And until that time came, he wouldn't talk to Darman either. He couldn't. He had no idea what to say or do.

He prayed *Kal'buir* would be on the line too. If not, if Niner couldn't get his father's orders, he'd have to make a decision on his own.

No matter what choice he made, he knew it would be a bad one.

Cold wind and bright light rushed through the open hangar doors. Gilad Pellaeon paced across on the flight deck between the Y-wing and the blastboard, staring at the snowfields and the clear blue sky as he waited for his personal comlink to connect to *Valediction*.

There was a click, and a burst of static, and then Mynar Vernedet's voice was a balm in his ear. "This is *Valediction* reporting. Is that you, captain?"

"It's me, Mynar. What's the situation up there?"

He heard Vernedet swallow hard. "Captain, we were attacked by several vessels. A corvette, a light cruiser, and two pickets. Profiles match ships from Slayke's fleet at Farstine."

Pellaeon's tired mind reeled with implications. Slayke was allied with the Jedi. Slayke might have even warned the Jedi about the *Eye* in the first place.

"Sir," Vernedet said, "Two ships escaped from the planet's surface. We weren't able to stop them."

"Two freighters?"

"The same that came in, sir."

"Then Slayke mounted a successful rescue mission and plucked the Jedi out from under our noses."

"It would appear so, sir."

If nothing else, it would get Grant the excuse he needed to launch a major offensive against Slayke and Syne's fleets,

though Pellaeon doubted it would salvage his own career much.

"What kind of losses did *Valediction* sustain, Mynar?"

"We're still tallying up fighter losses. Expect two to three squadrons worth, mostly TIEs. I'm pleased to report no casualties onboard *Valediction."*

"What about Slayke's attack?"

"They never breached the shields, sir."

"A distraction."

"Exactly."

"And I suppose I should ask how Commodore Zaarin handled himself."

He could see Vernedet squirming as he pondered an answer. In another situation, it would have been amusing.

"The Commodore is under control, sir."

"Well, *that*'s good to hear. How did you manage that?"

There was another pause. "There also another, ah, incident during the fight with Slayke's ships."

"What do you mean 'incident'? You said there were no casualties."

"Yes, sir. However, two security officers were stunned when Ohran Keldor hijacked a shuttle from the auxiliary hangar bay."

"He *what*?"

"The officers will recover. Keldor jumped to hyperspace before we could track him. I'm sorry, sir."

"Why did he flee?"

"Well, sir, his big project *was* something of a wash."

That was an understatement. The Emperor would probably want his head a polished platter. Pellaeon was a fool not to have stuck the engineer in the brig the moment they pulled him out of the escape pod. It was another mark on his record, and at this point he half-wanted Grant to sack him. However, despite his chain of failures, it probably wouldn't come to that.

"Is there anything to report from the surface, sir?"

Pellaeon took a deep breath. "We lost fifteen clones."

"I'm sorry, sir."

A normal officer in a normal war would be steeling himself to write letters to fifteen families, but this wasn't a war at all and those poor dead men had no parents or sisters. They did have brothers though, and he'd have to do something for the survivors, somehow.

"Sir, is there anything else?"

Pellaeon turned away from the white and the blue, even though he didn't want to. Against the rear wall of the hangar stood nine surviving clone soldiers in battered, dusty white armor. At their feet was the crumpled body of a Ho'din in Jedi robes and two little children, a boy and a girl, clinging tightly to eachother.

"We have captives, Mynar... Three Jedi."

"I see. The mission wasn't a total loss then. Shall I send a shuttle to your signal?"

"Please do."

"Do you need additional troops, sir? Two shuttles of backup commandos just arrived from Farstine."

"An empty shuttle will be sufficent."

"It's on its way. Is there anything else?"

Someone would have to tell Grant that the Emperor's Inquisitor had died somewhere in the tunnels. He didn't want that to fall on Vernedet's shoulders.

"Not right now, Lieutenant. I'll give a full report to the admiral when I get back aboard."

"We'll be waiting, sir. *Valediction* out."

The comlink clicked off. Pellaeon stuffed it in his pocket and walked across the hangar.

"A shuttle's on the way," he told the clones. "It should be here in a few minutes."

"Very good, sir." the sergeant looked down at the Ho'din. "Should we bind him, sir? The effect of the stun blast might wear out soon."

"Very well. Cuff his hands and feet."

Pellaeon didn't know what good it would do. He couldn't imagine how powerful this old Jedi, but he wasn't much to

look at. The sergeant had spotted him at the far end of a tunnel and dropped him with a single stun blast from an extended-scope DC rifle. Pellaeon hadn't been able to see him at all in the dark, but the clones' IR visors worked wonders. As for the kids, they stood over the crumpled Jedi's form and cried until the clones scooped them up.

It was a pathetic haul, two children and an old man. The evil Jedi in the latest holo-plays were always big, scary men with wild eyes and flashing lightsabers, but this alien didn't seem to have a weapon on him. Pellaeon knew enough about Jedi to realize that didn't negate him as a threat, but the Ho'din looked simply pathetic lying there, getting manhandled and shackled by clones.

Despite it all, he was a little relieved. If Hallena or any of Altis' associates had been here, they'd escaped. He didn't have those deaths on his conscience, though when he thought on the fate awaiting those children he wasn't soothed.

The clones finished their job and stepped away from the prone Jedi. His limbs started stirring, and his flat green face twitched. The sergeant readied his stun rifle but Pellaeon held up a hand. He unholstered his own pistol and made sure it was set to stun. If anyone was going to have the dirty deed of shooting a bound old man, it would be him.

He heard a scraping sound, and a hacking cough, and his head spun toward the door. All the clones except the sergeant pivoted and raised their guns, but froze when they saw the woman staggering through the threshold.

Ameesa Darys's clothes were torn and dirty. Her hair hung in tangles in front of her face but Pellaeon could see blood on her chin. She walked hunched forward, with one hand clasping a bloody wound on her side. The other hand was dragging something; a person's leg.

As Darys stepped into the hangar she pulled a person with her. The face was turned away but the curve of waist and

hip and shoulder, the dark skin of its bare hands, the tangled black hair, all froze Pellaeon in place.

Darys stopped in front of the clones. She swung her one arm forward and the prisoner's body went sliding across the deck. When it came to rest Pellaeon was looking down at Hallena Devis's battered, bloody face. One eye cracked open to stare at his, and he couldn't look away.

"Captain," Darys croaked, then somehow summoned a shout. "Captain! Report!"

Somehow Pellaeon turned from Hallena to Darys, who looked like she was going to collapse at any moment. Her Force was probably the only thing keeping her on her feet.

"This is all, Miss Darys," he gestured to the Ho'din and the children. "The rest got away."

He'd never seen Darys angry but he half-expected it now. This bloodied, wide-eyed person seemed a woman apart from the silent sniffer akk that he'd followed through the tunnels.

Darys staggered over to the Ho'din. The being's black eyes opened and he stared up at her.

His lipless mouth hinged open. "You... I... know you..."

"We met once, Master Plett. I was with my master, Jerec." She shifted her attention to the children, like her business with the old master was done. "What are your names?"

The boy and girl clung to one another. Darys unhooked the lightsaber from her belt and ignited it. Red light reflected off the children's pale and horrified faces.

"Miss Darys!" Pellaeon said, "You need medical attention immediately! Please stand down! My men can give you emergency-"

"Names!" she shouted.

"L-Lagan," the boy stuttered, "And this is Roganda!"

Darys shut the lightsaber off. She bent a little lower and said, "You are siblings."

"That's right." Lagan, brave little boy, pushed Roganda behind him.

Dary's head rolled to one side, like she didn't have the strength to hold it up. She said, “Step out, young woman. I won't hurt you.”

Roganda peeked out from behind her brother's shoulder. In a high trembling voice, she asked, “Who are you?”

“I'm going to give you a better life,” Darys rasped.

“W-What do you mean?”

“You want to be a Jedi, don't you?”

“We *both* do.” Lagan puffed up his chest with faked bravado.

“I could tell,” Darys said. It was surreal to Pellaeon that she was finally speaking so much, *now*, when she was bleeding out through her guts.

Roganda edged out from behind Lagan. “W-W-Who *are* you?”

“Children...” Plett groaned, “No... Don't... Don't...”

“It's all right.” Darys tapped the edge of her disarmed lightsaber against Lagan's chest. “I am your future, Roganda.”

Her weapon sprung to life. Red light speared out through Lagan's back. Roganda started wailing. Darys flicked off her lightsaber and snapped it across the girl's face. She crumpled, unconscious.

“No!” Plett shouted. “Lagan no!”

The Ho'din struggled to sit up. Before Pellaeon could order anything, the sergeant shot him with a stun bolt. He collapsed on the deck once more.

Pellaeon stood there, Hallena at this feet, and watched in shocked unspeaking horror as Darys turned to face him. She staggered one, two, three steps closer. He had the stupid idea to whip up his pistol and shoot her but his hand was slick with sweat and, even wounded, this woman- this *thing*- was deadly.

He found a voice, his captain's voice. “Miss Darys, I suggest we take all three prisoners to the ship for processing. We also need to get you to the medical bay immediately.”

He barely even trembled. The woman stopped, stared at him, and licked some of the blood from her lip.

Pellaeon heard the roar of the approaching shuttle behind him. Hot wind rushed his back, but he didn't look away from Darys. The woman slowly lowered his free hand to her side and hooked her lightsaber on her belt. She nodded, very slightly, then collapsed in a dark heap on the floor.

A few clones rushed to her but Pellaeon turned around. The shuttle lowered its landing struts and came to rest not ten meters in front of him, blowing hot air that plucked his green cap from his head, but all he could see was Hallena at his feet. Her eyes were both open now. He couldn't escape them, not even when the sergeant started calling him name.

Octavian Grant loved the smell of a new ship. He loved the polish on the decks and the slick surfaces of control consoles that hadn't been smudged over by a hundred hands. Some beings might say a warship had no right to be neat and pretty but they were missing a point. Even in war, a man had to retain a certain grace and civility; without it, he'd be nothing but a savage.

As he stood on the command deck of *Majesty*, looking down on the planet of Bavinyar, Grant breathed in the new ship's crisp clean air and felt a surge run through his body. While Grant normally preferred to leave battlefield tactics to task force leaders and ship captains and focus on larger strategy, he'd wanted to be here for this moment, so he'd transferred his flag to the *Gladiator*-class star destroyer. Just as he'd been there for the final battle against Marath Vooroo, he'd be here to end Syne. Seeing the climax of such a long chase first-hand would be intensely satisfying, and more importantly, it would ensure he got the recognition he deserved on Imperial Center.

Majesty was the only one of it's kind in the task force of nearly thirty capital ships arrayed over Bavinyar. The fleet contained a dozen picket ships, one brand-new *Secutor*--

class carrier whose fighters now swarmed over the planet, six *Venator*-class destroyers and, once Pellaeon returned from his mission, five *Victory*-class ships. *Majesty* was smaller than the other destroyers but it was a top-of-the-line vessel that packed just as much of a punch. It was also faster and more maneuverable than the other destroyers, which offered an array of advantages in pitched combat. The *Eye of Palpatine*, while a debacle, had at least justified his long aversion to super-massive, hyper-expensive war machines that drew rebel attacks like shadowmoths to a flame. He hoped Tarkin and Palpatine would learn something.

Proud as he was to be on *Majesty*, Grant knew the most important vessels in the fleet were the pair of interdictor cruisers sitting on opposite sides of the planet's orbit. With their artificial gravity wells on, *Grappler* and *Delayer* had effectively expanded the planet's own well ten times over. It was effectively impossible for a ship to flee the Bavinyar system, and just as impossible for Syne or Slayke to pop out of hyperspace unannounced.

But they would come. Grant would give them no choice.

As he watched the ships take position over the blue marble of Bavinyar, a reflection appeared in the transparisteel: *Majesty*'s captain, a dark-haired young man named Amise Griff. He saw the reflection snap a salute before he turned his back on the glorious view.

“Admiral Grant, we've received a direct transmission from *Valediction*.”

The summary of the events at Belsavis had already been passed to Grant, one as a carefully worded, official-sounding report, probably written up by *Valediction*'s first officer, and again with a more terse and informal rant by Demetrius Zaarin, who simultaneously admitted his TIEs flew poorly in atmosphere while blaming Captain Pellaeon for the losses sustained.

As for Pellaeon himself, well, Grant assumed he was about to get that report first-hand.

It was a message to be received in private, so he followed Griff to the command salon located behind the bridge. After dismissing the captain, he sealed the door and called Pellaeon's holo-image to life above a bland metal desk.

"I've already received your report, Captain," he told the saluting figure. "Are you en route to Bavinyar now?"

"We are, sir. Am I to understand we'll be part of a blockade over the planet?"

"This is correct."

"I see. Who's commanding the effort?"

"I am."

It took the captain a second to respond. Pellaeon had a reputation as a hands-on commander, which was fine for a star destroyer captain, but he seemed to assume admirals never got their hands dirty when the situation called for it.

"I take, sir, that this is a maneuver to draw out Syne?"

"You take it correctly. I understand several of Slayke's vessels ran interference for your escaping Jedi."

Pellaeon swallowed visibly. "They did, sir."

"Well, then, perhaps we will be seeing them again soon."

"If we do, sir, it's possible we may have other Jedi to deal with. There are also reports of Mandalorians fighting with the Jedi on Belsavis."

That was new, and certainly unexpected. The Mandalorians were a notoriously uncivilized bunch, accepting central authority only nominally and accepting cash from anyone who could pay. The Republic had stomped on their spine and the Empire intended to keep its foot pressed down, but like the savages they were, they often formed splinter groups that did whatever mad thing they wanted. The one surprising part was that they fought alongside *Jedi*. Grant couldn't think of a group more antithetical.

"I understand, Captain, that you left your post on the bridge to accompany the ground team to Belsavis."

That hadn't been something in the official report, but Zaarin had made the point very clear.

Pellaeon, to his credit, didn't seem ashamed. “I thought it best to assure the success of the mission, Admiral.”

“Most of the Jedi escaped, Captain.”

“That is true, sir, but we still captured three prisoners.”

“I know. A Jedi child, a Master, and one of their associates. I suppose the Master may prove useful to the Emperor. Do you have him under control?”

“He is locked in a cell, sir, and we've pumped the chamber full of anesthetic gas. He is not a threat.”

“Very good.”

Pellaeon hesitated for a moment, then said, “I'm not sure if you're aware of the status of Miss Darys, Vice Admiral, but she was severely wounded in the fight with the Jedi. She killed several, as I understand it, but she's currently in our sick bay receiving urgent medical attention. Rest assured, my best doctor is caring for her.”

Grant wondered what would happen if she died. Pellaeon had to be wondering the same thing. He wouldn't mind being rid of Palpatine's pet Force-user in theory, but he wanted to explain that loss even less.

“Keep me informed as to her condition, Captain. What is the status of Commodore Zaarin?”

“He is well, sir.” Even on the shrunken holo, Grant could see the frown flick over his face. “He says he wants to transfer to your ship the moment we arrive in Farstine.”

Grant hoped there would be a nice battle brewing by that time, but said, “Of course, I'd be happy to receive the Commodore.”

“Also, Admiral, I suggest we keep the prisoners aboard *Valediction* at this time. Moving Jedi is a tricky business, especially in a potential combat zone.”

“I agree completely. I believe you received a few squads from the Five-oh-First, haven't you?”

“We have, sir.”

“Then Vader's Fist should be sufficient to guard your Jedi until we arrange for a secure transfer.”

"Very good, sir." The man looked a little relieved, which was strange. Grant assumed any sane commander would want to shove the Force-users off on someone else at the nearest opportunity.

"Is there anything else, Captain?"

"No, sir."

"Very good. Have your crews on yellow alert when you arrive in the Bavinyar system. We have an interdiction field over the planet, so expect to be pulled from hyperspace near the asteroid belt. You'll have to go sublight from there."

"Understood, sir." Pellaeon snapped a salute.

"Command, out," Grant said, and the hologram flickered off.

So the *Eye* was a bust, and Belsavis handed ended up a draw. All well and good; Bavinyar was going to end things on a win, and what was the only thing that mattered in the end.

Grant left the command salon and stalked across the center aisle of the bridge. Griff pulled himself out of the crew pit as saluted Grant as the admiral stepped up to the forward viewport.

"All ships are in position, sir. We await your orders."

Grant looked out at the stars, the scattered ships, and the planet below. It was, all things considered a pretty world. The vast oceans were a shining aqua-blue, the scattered islands thick with greenery. Even the clouds had a certain lushness to them. He understood why the Bavinyari settlers had defended their island chains so fiercely.

He turned and walked across the bridge to the communications console. Griff stayed on his heels.

"Lieutenant," he told the woman manning the console, "I want a full-range broadcast to all ships and listening stations in this star system, including the planet. Patch it into my personal comlink. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." Her hands ran fast over the control board, flicking all the right switches. "You're ready, sir."

Grant plucked his comlink out of his breast pocket and said, “This is Vice Admiral Octavian Grant of the Galactic Empire. I am speaking from above the planet Bavinyar. While the planet itself has wisely accepted Imperial government, renegade elements of the planetary militia have gone on the offensive throughout this sector. They have attacked military and civilian targets without discrimination and enlisted other rebel factions for their cause. This can no longer be permitted.

“There are a total of eighty-seven inhabited islands on Bavinyar. We will commence orbital bombardment on one island every thirty minutes until the renegade leader Jereveth Syne personally surrenders to Imperial authority, beginning immediately.

“We deeply regret this action, but terrorism and insurrection have left us with no other choice.”

He flicked off the comlink and marched over to the gunnery station. “Weapons, I want you to locate the second-largest settlement on the planet.”

After a moment, a lieutenant responded. “Target acquired, sir.”

Grant craned his neck to get a better view. “Very good, Lieutenant. You may commence firing.”

The first green blasts speared out from under *Majesty*'s nose. They shot through the atmosphere and dwindled into nothing. Everything looked as it had for one second, and then an island lit up and the slow slaughter began.

19

"When I first met your father, and Fi and Niner and Atin, I knew they were men, not machines, and I knew they deserved better than what they got. Their choices were circumscribed from before they were born and even the slightest act of personal choice was a brave rebellion. You were one of those choices, Kad'ika*. You were a decision your father made. No matter what other choices he made, I'll always love him for that. And so should you."*

Once they boarded *Valediction*, they were marched off to an unused set of barracks and forced to wait. Men started to remove their helmets, sit down on the benches, and swap gossip like it was all business as usual. Joc started telling about his mission with Pellaeon and *Leveler* at JanFathal. Fixer and Soru started trading lewd jokes. Rede cautiously removed his helmet and stood with his back against the locker, listening to some conversation between Scorch and Olin.

The only ones with their helmets on were Niner and Darman. They faced each other from opposite sides of the room but didn't use their helmet speakers to talk. There was nothing to talk about. They could only wait for Jaing to call and reveal the results of Darman's treason.

Nobody bothered Darman, but Boss, helmet propped against his hip, sidled next to Niner and started talking to him. Niner reluctantly took off his helmet, put it on the bench, and responded. Darman couldn't hear them. It was

probably sergeant talk, though the Sixers' sarge, Brant, was listening to Joc's tale.

All the chatter became a blur of white noise until a voice whispered in Darman's ear: “Can you talk, *vode*?”

Darman didn't respond. He wasn't sure if he was imagining it. He glanced at his helmet controls and made sure his external speakers were turned off.

He waited for the voice to say again, “Is anyone there?”

“I'm here, Jaing. This is Dar.”

“Where's Niner?”

“Busy.”

“Where are you guys?”

“Star destroyer, *Valediction*. We're heading to Bavinyar.” Jaing didn't respond. He asked, “Where are you?”

“I'm safe for now. Dar... Are you sure you can't get Niner?”

Just let it be Zey, he thought. If it was just Jedi, everything would be all right. He'd existed in a state of emotional limbo since giving Melusar their location, waiting to see if his son was safe.

“Jaing, tell me what happened.”

“Dar...”

“*Tell me*.”

“Dar, they're dead.”

“Who?”

“There was an attack, an Imp attack on this Jedi safehouse on Belsavis. *Bard'ika* went there to protect-”

“*Bard'ika*?” Darman gasped. Jusik wasn't a Jedi anymore, he was pure *Mando*, he knew better than getting his head stuck on Zey's chopping block.

“*Bard'ika*'s okay, but a bunch of *vode* went with him. Not me. I'm safe, Ordo's safe, *Kal'buir* and Vau stayed safe...”

They hadn't heard much about the Belsavis mission, but Darman knew two shipfuls of Jedi had gotten away. He’d never thought his own brothers would get tangled in that mess. *Kal’buir* would have known better than to let them. He’d have never risked his sons for some Jedi.

"Who's dead, Jaing?"

"*Kom'ika. Prud'ika. Ad'ika*." Jaing swallowed audibly. That was half of the Nulls, his closest brothers. Darman couldn't imagine the pain he was in. Then the awful litany went on. "We lost Zey too, and Maze, and some other *jetii* they were with... Dar, we lost Atin. Atin's dead."

Darman felt nothing, knew nothing, believed nothing, not until the voice said again, "Atin's dead. I'm so sorry, Dar."

Sudden anger filled the void. He wanted to scream. He wanted to pound his fists against the lockers until his hands broke but the other commandos were all gathered around on the other side of his helmet's inviolable seal, chatting and chuckling and blissfully separate from his tragedy, even Niner.

He finally rasped, "How?"

"I don't know. I wasn't there. *Bard'ika*'s on his way back with a shipful of *jetii* kids-"

"*Jedi!"* he nearly shouted.

"They're *kids*, Dar-"

"Where are you now?"

"We're with more *jetii*. But listen-"

"Where's my son? What did they do to him?"

"Kad's safe, Dar, *udesii*. Listen, we can still get you and Niner. Just sit tight, wait, we'll think of something, okay?"

Darman couldn't respond. He couldn't process it all. His father had gone mad, his son was in the hands of the Jedi, and his brothers-

-his brothers were dead and he had killed them.

He couldn't take it any more. He spun and almost ran out of the locker room. Jaing's voice droned in his ear, "Dar? Dar? Dar?" as he staggered down the empty hall until the door opened on a ready-room. He wrenched off his helmet and threw himself inside. It was empty and plain, just shelves and a table with chairs, and he almost got to them before his legs gave out under him. He fell and half-caught the top of the table. He clung to it as he knees clacked against the tile floor. He lowered his head, smashed his

face against the flat metal plane, and gave himself over to his tears.

When Darman raced out of the locker room, helmet still on, Niner knew the worst had happened. He didn't remember what he said to Boss to excuse himself. First he was out in the hall, and then he was in the ready room, standing just inside the doorway, staring at Darman half-fallen against the tabletop and listening to his choking sobs.

He saw Darman's helmet laying on the floor and scooped it up. He cursed himself for leaving his own *buy'c* in the locker room but it was too late now. He snapped Darman's helmet on and said, "Jaing, are you there? Jaing? Jaing?"

Nothing. He must have been talking to Darman before, but he was gone now.

Niner took off the helmet. He put it on the table and reached down to take Darman by the shoulders. All his anger and frustration at his brother melted when he saw the pathetic, tear-wet face in front of him.

"Oh, *Dar,"* he breathed, "What is it? What happened?"

"They're dead... Dead..." He sniffled, stuttered. Drool ran down his mouth and pooled with tears on the tabletop.

He pulled Darman's body off the tabletop, turned it around, and set his back against one table-leg and his butt on the floor. He leaned over him, shook his shoulders, and asked "Who's dead, Dar, who?"

Darman's wet eyes rolled to one side, incapable of focus. "The Nulls... *Kom'ikai, Prud'ika, Ad'ika*... And... Zey... Maze..."

"Zey? Was this on Belsavis? Were they down there on that planet, Dar?"

His head bounced in a nod. One hand shot up and squeezed Niner's right. "They... they killed Atin. *At'ika*. He'd *dead*."

He'd tried to brace himself. He'd almost done it. He'd never known those Nulls that well, not really. With Zey and Maze, whatever they were wasn't family. But *Atin-*

He remembered first meeting Atin; the limp handshake, the withdrawn expression. And later, the shy smiles, the knowing looks, the quick mind, the *wife* he'd landed before anyone else in the squad, even Fi.

"I killed him," Darman moaned, "I killed *At'ika*."

Niner wanted to slap him, tell him no, it wasn't his fault, but it was. There was no way around it, no mistake.

Niner shoulder have stopped this. *Kal'buir* would have a long time ago. He'd have never let it get this bad but Niner wasn't half the sergeant his father was. He couldn't even protect one man from himself and now that one man had gotten half his brothers killed.

"I killed him," Darman muttered with wet lips. "I killed *At'ika*..."

There was the hiss of an opening door and the clacking of boots. Niner shot to his feet and spun around to see Scorch halfway across the room with his helmet under his arm and one hand reached up to open a cabinet.

He saw them and froze. His eyes darted down to Darman and he asked, "What happened? What's going on?"

"None of your business, *ner vod*," Niner said.

Scorch clearly didn't believe that. He put his helmet on the counter and said, "Dar, are you okay? Do you need-"

"Get out!" Niner shouted.

Scorch threw up his hands and backed out of the room, leaving his helmet behind. Niner stalked over to the door controls and locked it.

Darman was still slumped on the floor, still crying. Niner staggered over to him and somehow found the stretch to lift him up by the armpits and move him onto a chair. His brother's head still hung low to one side. His chest still rattled with sobs and tears ran down his cheeks and caught in the black stubble of his beard.

He was a man who had stayed behind to save his sergeant, but his sergeant hadn't saved him, and Niner knew he could never erase that failure.

If you think he's going to compromise this mission, you have to take responsibility, Kal'buir said, but Niner hadn't and Darman had, and the cost of failure was too hard to measure.

Darman choked on more tears, but said, "I had to do it... I had to..."

"What?" Niner's voice trembled.

"The Jedi... They've taken over *buir*, taken over everything. I had to protect my son! I was trying to protect Kad!"

Niner grabbed him by both shoulders. "Venku was *safe*, Dar! You should have trusted *buir*!"

His head wagged back and forth. "No. They're not safe, not from Force-users. None of us are. It's like Roly says. I *had* to, Niner... I'd do it again. I had to keep him safe, keep everyone..."

He trailed off, like the substance of his own words dissolved in front of him. New tears rolled from his eyes. His shoulders hunched forward and he dropped his head in his hands.

"I can't do it..." he gasped, "I can't see Kad... Not again... Not after this... Oh, *Kad*..."

Niner stood behind him. He stared at the back of Darman's head as he ran thick fingers through black hair. He could count the vertebrae-bumps along the back of his bowed and vulnerable neck.

Darman cried into his lap, "Niner, I'm so sorry..."

You have to take responsibility, Kal'buir had said.

"I'm sorry too," he said, and gently slid his sidearm out of its holster.

There had to have been another way. If Niner were a better sergeant, a better brother, a better son, he could have found one, but he wasn't *Kal'buir*.

He had failed everyone, just like Darman, but he was still a sergeant and a brother and a son. And he still had to take responsibility. It was the only thing left he could do for Darman.

His arms were weak. Tears ran cool trails down his cheeks and blurred his vision. He blinked them away and gripped his pistol in two hands.

"Oh Niner, I'm so sorry," Dar breathed. "I'm so sorry..."

"It's okay, Dar," Niner whispered. He raised the pistol and pointed it at the back of his brother's neck. Darman didn't move.

Niner squeezed his eyes shut and felt the hard trigger against his finger.

Darman said, "Tell *Kal'buir*.... Tell him I'm sorry..."

Niner squeezed. There was the harsh clap of a pistol-shot, the smell of ozone in a tiny room, and then the clatter of an armored body spilling onto the floor.

Only then did Niner open his eyes.

He stared. His gun fell to his side. He wanted to turn it on himself but he didn't even have the strength to lift it.

He froze there in an awful timeless void until he heard the beep of an emergency security override and saw the door slid open.

Rede was there, filling the threshold. He swung up his rife and said, "Sergeant! Drop your weapon now! *Sergeant*!"

It was so easy. His fingers relaxed. The gun clattered to the floor. When a blue stun-bolt popped out of Rede's rifle, even the void went away.

Interlude: The Deeper Cut

The day was dying fast. Gold sunlight cut at almost horizontal angles through the trees. Night would fall soon, the deep silent night of the wilderness, but neither the man nor the boy moved.

The boy stared at his hands. They were small and clenched in anger. His eyes were damp but he hadn't started crying, not yet. He knew it was coming but he didn't want the man to see him weep. He was less than twelve years old but he was still a Mandalorian and he didn't want to look like a child.

He steeled himself and asked, “Why did you kill my father to save a bunch of Jedi?”

The man shook his head and said, “Darman didn't just turn against the Jedi. He turned against *us*. He was *dar'Manda*.”

The boy knew that phrase. It meant *no longer Mandalorian*. It meant a man who had disgraced his family and banished himself from the community. Calling it *treason* would have been an understatement. Someone who was *dar'Manda* was worse than *arueti*, worse than anything. It was horrible, but there was no better word to describe his father.

But that didn't make sense. The boy's uncles still spoke of his father and when they did, which was rare, it was with a

certain bittersweet, wistful tone, something befitting a friend tragically lost, not the worst kind of traitor.

"I don't understand," the boy said. "When Fi or Corr talk about my *buir*, they don't talk like he's *dar'Manda.*"

The man sighed and looked toward the setting sun. You could make out slips of its shimmering red through the trees. "There's still story to tell."

"Then tell it."

"It's getting dark."

"I have to know."

The man looked down at the boy. Instead of speaking, he reached down into the insulated pouch tied to his belt. He felt inside for a moment, then pulled his hand out. He tossed something at the boy, and he caught it against his chest. It was heavy but not large. Its red-painted surface was scuffed and scarred, but he ran his bare thumb over it and recognized it as *beskar*.

"That's Atin," the man said. Not *that was Atin's.* To a Mandalorian the armor and soul were one and the body superflous meat.

"It's all I could get of him," the man said.

"My *buir*... He betrayed his brothers, got them killed... for *me*?" The boy ran his fingers over the shoulderplate. The tears started coming. He couldn't stop them.

The man pretended not to notice. "The Jedi used to teach that attachment is dangerous. In some cases, I guess they were right."

"*Shab* the Jedi," the boy swore. "Because of them my *buir*'s *dead*."

The man looked at him thoughtfully, as though he was seeing something in the boy for the first time. Eventually he said, "*Kad'ika*, I was the one who decided to go to Belsavis. *I* was the one who got them killed."

The boy looked up at the man, at his sad face. His mind whirled. It was his father's fault, Niner's fault, *Bard'ika*'s, the Jedi's, the Empire's. It was everyone's fault and no one's at the same time but that didn't make him feel better,

didn't deny the awful reality of what had happened without any single being willing it.

It seemed like the entire universe had conspired to crush his parents and steal them from his life. The sheer oppressiveness of it made him struggle to breathe.

"I don't understand," he gasped. "Whose fault is it?"

"Mine," the man said, then looked away. "Sometimes I think that. Other times, I don't know."

"But you're sorry? You're sorry you went to Belsavis?"

"Yes," said the man, but the boy could feel the unspoken *sometimes*.

The boy looked back at Atin's shoulderplate. He wrapped his hands around it, so hard that its edges dug painfully ito his palm. He swallowed more tears and said, "I want to keep this."

"You have every right to."

"I'll wear it. I'll remember him with it."

"You should."

The boy took a deep breath in, a deep breath out, and stared up at the man. "Tell me the rest of the story."

"Night's coming."

"It already has."

The man crouched down on his heels, like he'd suddenly gone tired of standing. He ran two fingers through the dirt, stirring up twigs and pine-needles, and gradually brought them to a single point.

"I never understood all of what happened on Belsavis," he said, "There were too many different players and too many factors. I wish I'd learned what happened to Callista Masana, but I never did. Some things will always be mysterious, and part of being grown-up, *Kad'ika*, is learning to live with what you don't know.

"But what came next, I think I do. Because all the strings that had been pulling our fate got knotted into one. Us, Altis's Jedi, the Bavinyari, we were in it together now, each and every one of us..."

Part III: Bavinyar
In This Twilight

20

"There aren't a lot of people in this life you can really trust, Kad'ika*. Even among Mandos there's plenty of* chakaare*, as you've probably heard. Sometimes you don't know if you can really rely on someone until you've both got your backs to the wall. But those people you* can *trust, they're your brothers, and you're not getting through this life without them."*

Gilad Pellaeon couldn't bear to be on his bridge right now. As a captain, he knew the importance of showing yourself before your crew and keeping a finger on the pulse of your ship, but at that moment he'd never felt less qualified to be leading men into battle.

He called Vernedet to his private cabin instead. He tried to recall the last time the two of them had sat down there and it came quickly: the conversation, the flavored beef stew, the fine wine, the assignment from Grant that had interrupted it all. It had been less than a week ago but it felt like it had happened to totally different people living different lives.

When Vernedet showed up in his door the man snapped a salute. Pellaeon waved it away and walked over to his table. He sat in the same seat from their last meeting and so did Vernedet. They stared at each other across the empty tabletop until Pellaeon mustered the strength to speak.

"Anything to report, Lieutenant?"

"A few things. There was an incident with some of the new clone troopers that arrived at Belsavis."

"The Five-oh-First? They're supposed to be elite. What kind of incident?"

"It seems one clone shot another, sir. Killed him."

Pellaeon pulled himself upright in his chair. "Very strange. Do we know why?"

"No, sir. I've put the clone in the brig and sealed off that deck. I've been trying to keep word of it tightly restricted. Wouldn't be good for morale."

He was a good man, Vernedet, always on top of things, but Pellaeon's mind veered toward another topic. "How is Darys?"

"Still in sick bay. She's conscious, though. She says she wants to interrogate the Jedi."

"The Ho'din, Plett?"

"That's right. She'll probably get her way. I hear her kind can... play with people's minds. Affect their judgment."

"Doctor Rhoades is no fool. She'll keep her patient where she belongs. Is there anything about... the other prisoner?"

"Darys didn't mention her. I think she has Jedi on the mind, but it's still six hours to Bavinyar, so she might change her mind."

Vernedet had never met Hallena, but he'd heard about her. Pellaeon had shown him the only holo he had, a dour head-shot taken by *Leveler*'s medic after they gave her a check-over following the JanFathal mission. Vernedet had called the picture striking and he'd even sounded honest.

Pellaeon looked down at the red and blue squares of the rank badge on his chest. He plucked it off his uniform and set it down in the middle of the table.

"Captain?" Vernedet frowned.

Pellaeon rose from the chair. He walked over to the liquor cabinet, opened the drawer, and selected a slim bottle of Tralus whiskey with two tumblers. He planted the cups on the table and poured a mouthful into each.

"Gil, are you all right?"

Pellaeon sat down and raised his glass. "Drink with me, Mynar. Please."

Vernedet took the glass cautiously and tapped it against Pellaeon's. They drank, swallowed, and coughed at the same time. It was the strong stuff they needed.

Pellaeon sat back in his chair. "I've been saving that. I wanted to have it now, while there's still time."

"Gil, what's wrong?"

Pellaeon looked at his empty glass and pondered whether to pour another. "You know who that prisoner is, don't you?

Vernedet nodded. "If you can explain that to me, I'd appreciate it."

"I don't know the whole story, but Hallena was working with Djinn Altis's Jedi faction. After JanFathal she hooked up with them and I guess she's been with them ever since. She ended up on Belsavis with them."

"Captain... Gil, when did you last talk to her?"

"Not since JanFathal. She didn't tell me where she was going but it wasn't hard to guess."

"That was almost four years ago. There's been nothing since then?"

Pellaeon shook his head. Losing himself in his work had been the only escape from the pain of her sudden departure, and unfortunately for the galaxy, there was plenty of work for soldiers, even after the war's official ending.

"Gil-" Vernedet stopped and looked away.

"I can't do it Mynar. I can't give her over to Darys." Even after four years, the sight of her in the flesh had stopped his heart. One look had torn up all the scabs and left the wound bleeding again.

"You have a duty, as an officer in the Imperial Navy."

He tapped his rank badge. "I can't do it. I can't do any of this. Mynar Vernedet, as first officer of *Valediction*, it is your duty to take the place of a captain who is unfit for duty."

Vernedet simply stared. Pellaeon clenched his jaw tight; he'd said what he could say, do what he had done. At JanFathal, where he'd wasted good men's lives to recover one intel agent, he'd divested his relationship with Hallena because he couldn't in good conscience order men to die without knowing their commander's true interest. It had killed his chance for career advancement but it had been the right thing to do.

Now it was different. Hallena wasn't Republic Intel, she was a traitor to the Empire and ally of its most wanted fugitives. There was no way out of this one, no way to protect Hallena and keep his uniform.

From the moment he saw her bleeding in the hangar on Belsavis, he'd known the uniform was forfeit.

Vernedet didn't reach for the badge. “Captain, you need to think about this.”

“I have. I have two priorities. I can't handle them both.”

“And if I take command, what happens to you? Do you want me to throw you in the brig with her? What then? You want *me* to execute you?”

“As captain you can do whatever you want, but-”

Vernedet’s hand lashed out. The badge went skidding back into Pellaeon's chest. “Gil, I'm not doing this. You're the *captain*. You have to make a choice.”

“I just did.”

“No, you shoved it off on me, and if I weren't your friend I might have taken it.” Mynar Vernedet rarely raised his voice in anger, so when he did it hit hard. “I'm sorry, but there is no easy way out of this. You're going to have to make the *hard* choice.”

“I am not handing Hallena over to be torn apart by that *monster* down in sick bay.”

Vernedet was suddenly on his feet and leaning over the table. “Gil, she's not your lady friend anymore, she's a traitor to the Empire. She's a part of the same people who tried to overthrow the government.”

“No she isn't! Altis had nothing to do with the coup.”

"It doesn't matter! They're *Jedi*! You have the same duty as every last Imperial citizen here, to apprehend her and convey her to proper authorities. What do you want to do, run away with her and play house with the Jedi too?"

Pellaeon bent forward and pressed his head into his hands. He didn't know what he could say. He didn't know what to do. For the first time in his career he saw no escape, no way to win. His whole mind and heart were in revolt but they had no escape.

"Gil," Vernedet said, voice soft again, "Have you even *talked* to her yet?"

He shook his head.

"It's been four years. She might not be the same woman you remember."

He knew she would be. People never changed much in the end. He also knew he had to see her, speak with her, before he went mad.

Vernedet sat back in his chair. "You know, Gil, you were never the kind of man to get hung on one woman like this."

Old memories, academy memories, came back. "No, Mynar. That was your specialty. But Hallena is different."

There was a long silence. Then there was the clanking of glasses as Vernedet poured one more mouthful of Tralus whiskey in either cup.

Pellaeon picked his head up to see Vernedet offering a toast. He said, "I'll kill the listening devices in the cell as long as you're in there. All right?"

Hallena was a rare woman, Vernedet a rare friend. Pellaeon tried to console himself with that as he toasted and drank.

Then he put his badge back on and went to see Hallena.

In the months since they'd lost Sev, the survivors of Delta Squad had rearranged themselves to fill the hole he'd left behind. Fixer upped the sarcasm and black humor, while Boss had become even *more* attuned to the fine details of each operation. Scorch had compensated by spending more

time at the shooting range, though he still wasn't half the sniper Sev had been. It was like they were trying to make up for the team's sudden lack of those qualities. It was also a good way to work through the grief, as well as the lingering guilt of having followed orders and pulled out when they should have stayed behind and looked for their brother. Joc, a 501st veteran from the start, had brought his own weary experience and wry humor, and that had altered the new squad even more.

In a way, Scorch had found himself envying Niner and Darman. Even with Bry, Ennen, and finally Rede being put into their teams, the Omegas had remained the same parts of a whole the Deltas hadn't.

That was the story he'd built in his head, anyway, and he'd never expected it to come crashing down.

It still wasn't clear what had happened in the ready room. All the men from the 501st knew was that there'd been a shot, and one man was taken out in a body bag and another locked up. Nobody knew what had happened to the third man.

Scorch had been the last one to see Niner and Darman. He'd been so shocked the sight of Dar, prostrate and weeping on the floor, that he'd stumbled out of the room without even taking his helmet. He'd never get it back now; security had sealed the room tight and ordered the 501st boys to relocate to a different deck.

If they'd been back in the barracks on Coruscant, they wouldn't have even dared talk about it, though it was clearly on everyone's mind. They were on a brand-new ship, and from what Joc said, Captain Pellaeon wasn't a guy who planted listening devices in every room, so once they were in their new locker room, the Deltas and the Sixers gathered around to hash it out.

Boss told everybody to kill the audio input on their helmets before they started, just in case Holy Roly had any kind of patch in them, even though their CO had stayed behind on Farstine. Scorch thought that was close to

Niner's kind of paranoia, but after what had just happened, everyone was jumpy and they quickly complied.

Scorch may have lost his helmet but he'd grabbed a spare black bucket from the locker room when they'd been moved. It was only when he looked inside to switch off the comm that he realized the helmet had belonged to Niner.

It felt several different kinds of creepy, sitting there with Niner's *buy'c* in his lap, but he didn't take it away.

Because everybody knew he'd been the last in the ready room before *whatever* had happened, all eyes turned to Scorch.

"I have no idea what happened, guys, I swear it," he shook his head. "I went into that room and Dar was on the floor, crying. Niner yelled at me to get out. He was mad, mad like I've never seen him."

"Fierfek..." Boss shook his head. "They must have heard something."

"Heard what?" Brant, the Sixer's sarge, asked.

Boss, Scorch, and Fixer exchanged glances. Boss kept his mouth clamped shut, but somebody had to say it, so Scorch did.

"Niner and Darman have been in contact with their old *Mando* trainers," he said.

"From Kamino?" Olin was clearly surprised. The Sixers had been trained by some mercenary from Nar Shadaa. They'd never understand what it was like under the *Cuy'val dar*.

"What was his name?" Joc asked. "Skirata, was it?"

"Hey, I've heard of him," Kol said. "I heard he was a nasty piece of work. Drunk all the time, beat his clones-"

"That wasn't Skirata," Fixer said. The sergeant had never been a drunk, and he was too soft-hearted to beat his sons. That had been Vau's specialty.

"The point is, Niner and Dar had friends on Mandalore." Scorch lowered his voice, just to be extra-safe. "That includes the boys from their squad that deserted."

"Traitors, then," Kol scowled, but nobody else did.

Olin leaned forward. “So what you're saying is, they've been in contact with outside elements, and those elements told Darman something to set him off.”

“It's the only thing I can think of.”

“What did they tell him?” Joc asked. He sounded curious.

“I don't know, but it was bad.”

“Somebody must have died,” Boss said grimly. “Atin or Corr, maybe. Or even Skirata.”

“*Shab*,” Fixer exhaled. Grief settled over his face. It was probably a perfect mirror of Scorch's.

“Don't get all weepy for some deserters,” Kol warned.

“Knock it off,” Soru spoke up. “They were still brothers.”

“Yeah, brothers who-”

“Shut it,” Brant snapped, and looked at Boss. “So what happened in the ready room? Who ended up dead?”

“Rede was different,” Boss said. “He was one of those Spaarti clones and he was always... weird. You know how they are.” Everyone nodded, even Kol. “The way I figure, Rede must have found out, so maybe they killed him, or he killed one of them and took the other prisoner.”

“Darman was in no shape to fight anybody,” Scorch said. “No shape to run either.”

“So what, you think Rede slotted him, took Niner captive?” asked Olin.

“Or Rede slotted Niner and took Dar.”

“Then where the hell is Rede?” Joc sounded angry.

“I don't think we'll be seeing them again,” said Brant.

The thought stunned Scorch. The Deltas and Omegas had trained together since they were two years old. Just like their sergeants, the two squads hadn't always gotten along, but they'd still been a team. When Corr, Atin, and Fi skipped to Mandalore, it had hurt, but at least they were alive and kicking. This was like losing Sev all over again.

“We at least deserve an explanation,” said Soru. “I mean, even when Ennen ate his blaster, they still gave him a burial.”

"This is different. Treason," said Kol, though the anger had gone out of him. He seemed as grim as everybody else now.

"When Sev went MIA they didn't lift a *shabla* finger to find him," Fixer scowled. "They didn't even bother to tell us when they switched his official designation to killed in action. Boss had to look it up."

"We need *something*," Soru said. "After all we've been through, we deserve it."

Scorch snorted. Fixer shook his head. Boss just looked grim. Clones deserved a lot of things they never got, and on some level they were all used to it. Most of the time they could forget how little their own government cared about them, but not now. It really was Sev all over again, only this time it was two brothers instead of one.

Even the guilt was there, again. Scorch should never have walked out of that ready room, no matter how much Niner yelled at him. If he'd stayed, things could have been different. He should have stayed with his fellow clones, helped them, watched over them, but instead he'd run and left them to who-knew-what fate. Just like Sev.

Suddenly the locker room door slid open. Everybody half-jumped out of his seat and awkwardly angled to the nearest person, like they'd been having a bunch of private chats instead of a big round-circle.

It wasn't very convincing; Scorch found himself staring at the back of Soru's head. The white-armored trooper in the doorway didn't seem to mind.

"All Five-oh-First soldiers are requested at a briefing on Deck F-5, room 73B."

"Yeah? When's that?" asked Boss.

"Five minutes."

"Okay." He grabbed his helmet. "Ready when you are."

The clone gave a short nod and waited for them to gather their helmets and kits. Scorch froze and stared at Niner's helmet in his hands. Wasn't it a *Mando* thing to keep pieces from the armor of the dearly departed? Probably. He

wished he'd grabbed something from Darman too, just to cover his bases. He owed them a lot more than that, but it was the best he could do.

He still felt morbid as he slid Niner's helmet over his head, but when it clicked into place it was just like the mask he'd always worn.

A half-dozen clone troopers lined the hallway of the detention block. Pellaeon normally would have acknowledged them as he passed, clone or not, but right now all he could think about was the cell marked 2B on the door.

He paused in front of it, stared at its blank gray face for a moment, then punched his captain's authorization into the keypad to open it.

He stepped into the cell. There was just enough room for him to stand and for Hallena to lay on the white cot stretching along the wall. She was awake, with her hands folded on her stomach and her head on a pillow. She stared at him but didn't say a thing.

Pellaeon couldn't speak either. He took her in: the familiar form of her body, the curve of her neck, the shape of her lips, the darkness of her skin and the whiteness of her eyes.

None of it had changed in four years.

Everything else had.

"Oh Hallena," he breathed. Half of him wanted to throw himself onto the cot with her. The other half couldn't bring himself to touch her.

"Gil." Her limps pressed together in a very small smile.

"Oh Hallena, I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"I'm surprised you're here."

"I'm as shocked you are. The coincidence of it-"

"What are you doing on this ship, Gil?"

"I'm her captain."

"Why?" Her tone was flat and impossible to read.

"What do you mean, why?"

She pushed herself up on her elbows. "Gil, why are you still with the Empire?"

It was such a simple question that he didn't know how to answer it. “Hallena, I am an officer. This is what I do.”

“I was a spook until I realized I didn't like the people I was serving.”

There were plenty of people in the Navy who weren't happy about the direction Palpatine was taking his new government. Pellaeon wasn't happy about a lot of things either, but he was still an officer. He'd wanted to be one since he was a child. He'd lied about his age just to get into the academy. He couldn’t picture any other life.

“I have a duty, Hallena. I swore an oath. I serve the legitimate government and I protect its citizens.”

She shook her head. “Oh, Gil, you're not that naïve. I know you're not.”

“Yes, I know, there were problems with the Republic and problems with the Empire-”

“Yes, and the Empire's problems are a whole lot worse. Gibadan? Caamas? Kashyyyk? Slaughtering every last Jedi? Not even the Republic was that bad.”

“Don't listen to conspiracy theories. The Empire had nothing to do with Caamas.”

“You're avoiding the question. You're not even looking at me.”

She was right. He wasn't. Hearing the anger in her voice was enough; he didn't want to see it on her face. He was even more angry at himself. He knew Hallena, how convicted and strong-willed she was, and he should have known their reunion would take this turn.

He forced himself to meet her eyes and almost shirked from the hate in them. He snapped, “What do you expect me to do, damn it? Throw off my uniform, desert my post, abandon all these people who trust me, and what? Run off the same Jedi who just killed my men?”

It was what he'd been suggesting to Vernedet just minutes before and now he was rejecting it completely. Nothing made sense anymore. It was a galaxy gone mad.

"You *were* a good man," Hallena said, "but you can't be a good man serving a government like this."

"If good men walk out things will get even worse. I'm not like you. I don't cut and run whenever responsibility gets *inconvenient*."

There it was, put into words, out in the open. He was an idiot not to have known that from the start too. He was an idiot to have even come down here at all.

"Get out, Gil," she snarled.

He stared down at her angry face and couldn't move.

"Get out!"

She surged up from the bed. One arm swung up but he caught it by the wrist. She froze, off-balance, a step away from him, and one tug would have pulled her into his arms.

He wanted that. Her eyes still blazed with anger, her lips were dry. He wanted to lose himself in them.

She wrenched her arm free and fell back down on the bed. Something took hold of Pellaeon; he spun on his heel and walked out. When the door hissed shut behind him his knees went weak, and he almost fell to one side when a clone trooper grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Sir? Are you okay, sir?"

He looked at the white mask in front of him. Another man who knew nothing but duty, and got nothing but used.

Pellaeon jerked free and said, "I'm fine. Thank you."

The clone snapped a salute. Pellaeon didn't even nod at him. He hurried down the hallway as fast as he could, but he couldn't escape his sudden revulsion at everything: Hallena, the clone, this damned pretty warship, and most of all the rank badge on his chest.

When the 501st commandos gathered in the briefing room's shallow arena, Joc pointed out over their headsets that the young officer by the main holoprojector was not Captain Pellaeon. The lieutenant's bars on his chest were already a clue, and when the briefing started the guy introduced himself as the executive officer, Vernedet.

The XO wasted no time in diving into the briefing. He thanked them for coming all the way to Belsavis on short notice, then explained that they were now en route to the planet Bavinyar. Vice Admiral Grant had just enacted a siege over the planet in the hopes of drawing out a fleet of Sep die-hards that had still resisted Imperial authority. So far, so normal. It didn't sound like a job for the so-called Vader's Fist.

Then he dropped the bomb that the Jedi on Belsavis had apparently been rescued by ships from said rebel fleet. Vernedet vaguely implied that they had some way of sensing Jedi (and Scorch was pretty sure that required *another* Force-user) and said that the moment Jedi popped up over Bavinyar with the rebel fleet, the 501st would swing into action. He seemed to think the Jedi could and should be captured alive, which was a big difference from Holy Roly's kill'-'em-all approach, but everybody knew Captain Melusar wasn't on the same wavelength as the rest of the military. Since they were effectively on detachment to Vice Admiral Grant's sector fleet pending further notice, they'd go along with the new orders.

Scorch was listening closely to Vernedet's spiel when a voice whispered, right in his ear: “Niner? Darman? Are you there?”

Scorch's first thought was that he was going mad. Then the voice said again, “Niner? Dar?” and everything fell into place.

Of course they'd been talking to Skirata through their *buy'ce*. It was the most secure way. Scorch quickly and quietly killed his link with the rest of his squad and said, “Scorch here.”

“Scorch? What the *shab*?”

It was one of the Nulls. Scorch could barely tell them apart in-person, let alone via audio. “Who is this? Where are you guys?”

“This is Jaing. I'm with Skirata and Vau. Safe. Scorch, where's Darman and Niner?”

"Jaing, something happened. We don't know what. I ended up with Niner's *buy'c*."

"*What*?"

"Someone's dead." Scorch exhaled. "We think their squadmate, Rede, the Spaarti barve, he shot one of them, took the other prisoner. He must have found out they were talking to you."

The silence on the line was awful. Vernedet was still droning on about the siege of Bavinyar but Scorch wasn't listening any more. He waited, breathless, for Jaing to reply.

Then a new voice said: "Who's dead and who's captive?"

It was Walon Vau. Scorch had never thought he'd hear from his training sergeant again. He'd never been sure he *wanted* to. But somehow, right now, that old bastard's voice made him feel safe.

"I'm not sure. I can try to find out. Sarge, I saw Darman break down. What's going on?"

Vau's sigh crackled in his ear. "A lot of *osik*. I can't explain it all, but most of Skirata's boys were on Belsavis trying to rescue a bunch of *shabla jetii* whelps."

"Jedi? Skirata helped *Jedi?"* Scorch couldn't think of anything more implausible-

-unless those Jedi were helping his boys somehow, maybe with the work on restoring clones' natural aging.

"We lost half the Nulls. Kom'rk, A'den, Prudii." Vau paused. "Atin's gone too."

Scorch swore. The Nulls were always crazy barves but Atin was a good guy, diligent and dependable, the kind any squad would want on the roster. Once upon a time, he'd been one of Vau's trainees, just like them.

"Sarge, we're on a star destroyer riding from Belsavis to Bavinyar. We've got a couple prisoners aboard, I heard some Jedi and a woman, maybe you know her."

"I'll look into it."

"They say they've laid siege to Bavinyar. They want to draw out some renegade fleet, and the Jedi too."

"Yeah, Grant threw down the gauntlet."

"Whatever you're tangled up in, you've got to get out, *now*."

He expected Vau to agree, or maybe blame soft-hearted Skirata for getting them tangled up with the Jedi in the first place. Instead there was a long, drawn pause, while Vernedet rambled on.

Then Vau said, "We've found a way to reverse your accelerated aging."

Scorch's jaw dropped inside his helmet. He blinked, snapped it up, and said, "Is this a joke, Sarge?"

"No joke. We ran the procedure on all the Nulls and Omega boys. They've got full lives ahead of them."

"The ones that are left," Scorch muttered.

Some clones managed to get through their work without ever thinking, even a little, about what it would be like to take off the kit and live sixty years of a *normal* life like other beings got. Scorch had seen too much of the galaxy to be that satisfied in his cage. He'd never gone all dreamy-eyed about it like Fi or Darman, but yeah, he wanted it. Sev had definitely wanted it. Fixer probably did, and he bet Boss did too, even if he never said it out loud. Joc had waxed wistful about it more than once, and so had Soru from the Sixers. It was something every clone who'd seen a little of normal life thought about but was afraid to say aloud.

They already knew the Empire didn't give a fat *shab* about their wellbeing. Losing Sev, painful as it was, had been a dose of cold water that washed away a lot of the illusions they'd dragged with them since Kamino. If their government wasn't going to take care of them they'd have to take care of themselves. It was what they should have been doing from the start.

"*Buir*," he asked, "Can you still do it? Can you fix us?"

"You're damn right we can. And we will."

His mind swam in possibilities. When they launched over Bavinyar toward whatever target, they could commandeer

a shuttle. Maybe. He could talk Boss and Fixer into it. He had a feeling Joc would go for it too. But what about the Sixers? What about the other 501st squads they might be paired with?

What about Niner or Darman, locked in the brig and waiting to die?

"*Buir,"* he said, "Do you have a plan?"

"Not yet. Skirata's a mess right now, but I'll get him straight. We're getting you out, son. You understand? We're getting you *all* out."

Vau's voice was tight with emotion, the kind Scorch couldn't remember hearing from his sergeant before. He didn't even sound like the same man.

But then his voice got cold and hard again, like it should, and Vau said, "Talk to Boss and Fixer. Tell them what we've got. If there's any clones you trust, *really* trust, let them know too. Find out how far they're willing to go. You can't call me on this thing, but I'll call you. How long until you reach Bavinyar?"

"Um, six hours."

"I'll call before then. Be ready."

There was no beep, no click, no scratch of static, but Vau was gone. Scorch knew it.

He sat there, listening to Vernedet finish his speech without caring, and when the man was done the clones stood up and marched back to their barracks. Scorch trusted Niner's helmet was secure, but he didn't know about Boss' and Fixer's and there was no point taking chances on something like this.

When they got the locker room he took off his helmet and waited for Fixer and Boss to do the same. When their heads were clear he grabbed them each by the shoulder, pulled them in close, and said, "*Vode*, we've got to talk."

21

"We all felt we needed to grieve then, and none of us had the time for it. In a way our dire straits were a blessing, because they focused us on what lay ahead instead of the things behind us. The crisis at Bavinyar, awful as it was, kept us from being swallowed by our loss."

A'Sharad Hett was alive, but it felt like a waking dream.

They'd swept him into *Scarlet Thranta*'s airlock, hurried him into a bacta tank, and soaked him in it the whole ride back to the fleet, but he'd hardly needed it. His spacewalk over Belsavis had left some of his extremities damaged by the cold, and a brief shortage of oxygen to his brain, but that was all.

When the shuttle from *Thranta* carried him over to *Iconoclast*, he felt as though he was strangely dislocated from his body. He could feel the tense moods of the shuttle pilots, though they kept their faces blank. As he looked out the viewport at passing ships he could feel the life presence emanating from all of them; fainter for the smaller pickets, but blazing bright from big ships like *Iconoclast* and Slayke's flagship, *Freedom Song.*

Most bright of all, however, was the strange, ugly vessel now hanging in space between the two flagships. It looked as though multiple bulk cargo haulers had been melded together. Hett could feel the Force-presence of many Jedi radiating from that ship, more Jedi than he'd thought still alive.

It was a miracle he'd never expected, and it should have cheered him, but he felt strangely detached from their luminous presence. After the Force had gifted him with the vision of Skywalker's descendant, it felt as though the path he'd been set on put more distance between him and other Jedi, not less.

When the shuttle landed inside Syne's dreadnaught, he was met by the woman herself, with Sajin waiting patiently on one side and two columns of Bavinyari troops behind her.

Syne kept her expression cold as Hett walked down the ramp, but he could feel her relief in the Force. Something else felt strange about her presence, but he couldn't place it. He wanted to embrace her right there on the flight deck, but he knew she wouldn't approve, so he stopped himself a meter in front of her and snapped a salute.

"It is good to have you back, A'Sharad," she said, and her voice didn't waver.

"It's good to be alive." He lowered his hand and nodded in Sajin's direction. Her face was grim and his spirits fell. "I've heard about Bavinyar."

"Grant started by destroying the settlement on Waylar," Sajin named the planet's second-most-inhabited island. "That's over a hundred thousand people."

He glanced at Syne. "Have people started evacuations?"

"There is no place to evacuate *to*," Syne scowled. "Grant's raised an interdiction field over half the system."

He could still feel her relief, but it had been overtaken by a surge of anger and restless helplessness. Grant had caught them in the perfect trap: surrender or let Bavinyar be destroyed.

He could feel her will, strong as durasteel these many months, finally start to waver. He knew she was honestly thinking about giving in. It would save so many lives; from a moral standpoint, a Jedi standpoint, it was hard to object.

Sajin said, "Mister Hett, you arrived just in time for a meeting about the situation."

"Lead on, then," he said.

The blond woman nodded and started for the exit. Syne followed and Hett slipped alongside her. As they entered the corridor their shoulders pressed together and he felt a touch of firmness and warmth, and a sudden clarity through the Force.

He felt the memory of her father, still calling for revenge. He felt bitter knowledge the futility of their endeavor. He felt deep, deep hatred for Octavian Grant, the man who had killed her family and brutalized her world.

He felt the life growing inside her.

Hett staggered and nearly fell against the wall. Syne and Sajin both stared at him but he pushed himself upright and kept walking.

He could feel it now, faint but impossible to deny, a fourth presence among them. He didn't know how old it was, or what gender, but he knew there was a child inside Syne.

She kept her face hard and her eyes ahead. Hett wanted answers to a thousand questions but couldn't ask any now.

Everything had changed in an instant. Even the vision of Skywalker's child was banished by the reality of his own. The Jedi Temple hadn't prepared him for love or war; it certainly hadn't prepared him for fatherhood.

The universe had become a different place in an instant. As his mind struggled to adjust, he followed Sajin and Syne into the same conference room where they'd first met Slayke. The big red-haired man was there again, as was Yvolton. Two new men were there as well. They sat side-by-side but looked profoundly uncomfortable together. One was an older man, gray hair tired back in a messy ponytail, dressed in ragged brown Jedi robes. The other one wore his gray hair short; he had sharp, angular features and wore jet-black body-armor. A T-visor Mandalorian helmet, also black, sat on the tabletop in front of him.

He didn't see Hallena Devis's dark face. It took him a moment to remember she was dead on Belsavis.

He sat down next to Syne. The old Jedi was looking at him intently but he didn't say a word. Syne introduced him to the newcomers, who in turn named themselves as Djinn Altis and Walon Vau.

Yvolton started by explaining the details of Grant's siege, and listed the settlements he'd targeting thus far. He'd started with Waylar to get his point home, but since then he'd mostly been targeting smaller islands with populations of less than ten thousand. When he'd move back to bigger targets was anyone's guess.

"Our options are extremely limited," Yvolton said. "We simply don't have the ships on Bavinyar to evacuate the planet and we have no way of getting them through the blockade. Grant's forces outgun ours almost four-to-one." Grimly, he looked at Syne. "For the good of Bavinyar, it would save the most lives if we surrendered."

"That's not an option," Hett snapped. All eyes went to him. Altis' felt especially probing, though he felt no penetration in the Force.

"Surrender's never been my style." Slayke put in. "Madam Syne, my men are willing to fight. I know we can't straight-up beat Grant, but there's got to be some way to break that interdiction field and get people off the planet."

"I'm afraid we just don't have the ships," Yvolton said. "The atmosphere-capable ships in this fleet are too small in number to evacuate anything more than a portion of the population."

Master Altis cleared his throat. "My ship, *Chu'unthor*, is atmosphere-capable."

"How many being can she hold?" Slayke asked.

The old man considered. "I'd say at least two hundred thousand, if we pack them in."

A silence fell over the table. Hett could feel minds working through the new possibilities and accompanying risks: Slayke, Syne, Sajin. Yvolton wanted to surrender as soon as possible, that was clear, though he wouldn't go

against his madam by saying so. Walon Vau was the one Hett couldn't read: the man sat there with arms crossed over his black-armored chest like he didn't really care.

Syne didn't have the Force, but she must have sensed the same thing. "Mister Vau, I'd like to know what your forces are and whether they're at our disposal."

"They're not *my* forces, and they sure as *shab* aren't yours." The man sounded as harsh as he looked. "We lost almost half our number busting some Jedi brats off Belsavis."

"I'm very sorry about that," Altis said.

Hett could tell how guilty he felt, but Vau waved him off. "It doesn't matter. The point is, we have more boys we need to get home. They're going to be at Bavinyar and so will we. *That*'s our goal, so no offense, darling, but we're not going to fight your war for you."

"*Chu'unthor* is still at your disposal," Altis clarified quickly.

"Mister Vau, could you specific?" Syne asked. "Where are your 'boys' now?"

"They're riding a star destroyer back from Belsavis. They'll be at Bavinyar in about five hours."

"Are you talking about prisoners?" Sajin frowned.

"I'm talking about clone commandos, boys I trained, and I'm getting them out of Palpy's clutches. Problem is, one of 'em's being held prisoner, which is a long story, so we're going to have to find a way to bust them out."

"You're going to board a star destroyer to rescue your men?" Yvolton said in disbelief.

"If that's what it takes." Vau sounded unafraid. "By the way, my ears on *Valediction*- that's the vicstar- say they brought a few more prisoners from Belsavis. I hear a Jedi, a kid, and a woman, don't ask me who."

"Oh," Altis paled. "Oh, dear."

"What is it, Master Altis?" asked Syne.

"Call me Djinn," the man muttered. "But… since Belsavis, I've felt a presence in the back of my mind. It

almost feels like Master Plett, the Jedi who ran the safehouse there, was calling for me… But I'd been told he was dead."

"So this ship's got Jedi *and* clone deserters onboard," Slayke stroked his red beard. "Throw in a pack of Mandos and that's one less destroyer to worry about."

Vau said, "If you're suggesting something, come out and say it."

Slayke grinned. "Who wants to jack a star destroyer?"

The room reacted with stunned silence, but Slayke didn't stop smiling. He said to Vau, "We took my ship, *Freedom Song*, at the end of the war. Granted, it was full of tinnies and we found a way to switch most of 'em off, but we still managed to take it. I'd love to have one of the Imps' best new ships in our fleet."

"This is entirely different," Yvolton protested. "You can't just 'switch off' clones."

Vau made a sound, deep in his throat. Everyone looked at him, expectant. He said, "Might have to get back to you on that."

"Madam, are you actually considering this?" Yvolton spun on her.

She was; Hett could sense it. She didn't want to surrender, even now. The question in her mind was what good it would do to seize one enemy destroyer when they were still so badly outnumbered.

"If we take that ship we can throw Grant's whole plan into disarray," Hett said. "If we can get close enough to destroy an interdictor, we might be able to get people off-planet."

"You have to get *to* the planet first," said Vau. "With an interdiction field that big, they'll see you crawling at them from a long way out."

"There are ways to force Grant's fleet to break its placement grid," Syne said. "They will, however, be very costly."

"Madam Syne, please reconsider," Yvolton's voice cracked with desperation. "Tens of thousands are already dead. If we attack, and we fail, the *entire* Bavinyari people will be wiped out. Just like Gibadan. Just like Caamas."

"If you surrender now," Hett said, "What kind of Bavinyar will you leave behind?"

Yvolton raged at him but didn't speak aloud.

"Mister Vau," Syne said, "Please look into our options regarding *Valediction*."

"I will," he nodded.

"Andrein, Mister Slayke, I want a potential tactical plan for an evacuation of Bavinyar in one hour. Understood?"

"Yes, Madam," Yvolton nodded, loyal to the end.

"Excellent." Syne rose from her chair. "Sajin, observe their meeting. A'Sharad, please follow me."

She went immediately for the door. Hett hurried after her, and he felt Altis' eyes on his back. He had a feeling the old man had already figured out everything.

They made it all the way to the lift before he asked, "Jereveth, what is it? What's wrong?"

The lift started to move, taking them toward her private quarters. "You're acting strangely, A'Sharad. I don't need you to speak for me."

"I'm not speaking for you, I'm just-" He stopped. There was no point in hiding anything. He stabbed a finger on the lift controls, bringing it to a halt. He looked down at Syne, pressed close to him in the crammed space of the lift tube, and said, "You're pregnant."

She blinked. Her dark eyes betrayed nothing but he could feel her alarm.

"I didn't… I didn't look into your mind with the Force. I *felt* it, when I got off that shuttle. When we touched."

"Is *feeling* different from *looking*, A'Sharad?" she asked stiffly.

"It just *happened*. Ever since the battle, since I went EV, I've been having… I don't know how to describe it. The Force, it feels… different. Stronger. I don't know."

"Being near death can change a person."

"I've been near death before. This is different. Don't ask me how, I don't know. But it is."

She took a breath. "Is there anything you've *felt* that I should know about?"

"Yvolton hates your idea. He thinks it's suicide."

"I don't need magic powers to tell me that. What about the Jedi and the Mandalorian?"

"The Mando wants his boys back. I trust him that far and no further. He doesn't care whether you save Bavinyar or not."

"And Altis?"

"I think he just wants to save lives."

"If I wanted to save lives I'd surrender."

The bitter truth hurt. He spoke another. "If you surrender, our child dies."

She nodded. Her resolve still wavered, he could feel it. Syne was a patriot above all else, and her people were dying by the thousands as they stood there and talked. No matter what she chose, many more would die soon, and it was tearing her apart.

He put both hands on her shoulders. "We can't surrender now. We'll beat this. We'll survive."

"We can't win, A'Sharad. Someone is going to break before today ends."

"It will be the Imps. I promise you. We'll make Grant pay for everything he'd done to us." He squeezed her shoulders hard enough to make her squirm.

"Is this your Force speaking?" She said with faint mockery.

"No. Only me."

Silently, he thought: *Me, and my father*.

After all this time, A'Sharad Hett finally understood the man who had made him.

The flight from Belsavis had been awful, but when we arrived at *Chu'unthor* I found myself terrified to step onto

its deck. I couldn't bear to see *Kal'buir* after I'd gotten his sons killed.

I felt genuine relief when I didn't see him, but his absence soon became just as worrying. Most everyone else was there: Kina Ha, Uthan, Ny, Besany, Ruusaan with you in her arms, Ordo now standing, Laseema wilting between her crutches. Just seeing her broke my heart. Scout stood on the edge of the group with Lord Mirdalan improbably pressing his flank against her leg.

Mereel came down the ramp first, and he staggered into Ordo and Jaing's arms. For a moment all of us stared at the tableau of the three surviving Nulls before we forced our attention elsewhere. Besany quickly explained that Vau and Altis had gone over to hold conference on the dreadnaught that was apparently leading this fleet. When Ordo broke away from the other Nulls, he pulled Corr and Fi aside. I later learned that he was informing them that one of their Omega brothers was dead, the other captive, and that Vau was working on a plan to save them. They gave no outward response to this new wave of grief. Like the rest of us, they'd been broken so much already that one more blow failed to register.

Behind us, the second freighter roared into the hangar. It settled on the other side of *Cornucopia* and began to disgorge passengers. Most of *Kal'buir*'s family hovered awkwardly apart, but Scout and Kina Ha went over to help Margolis and Ash get all the children off the ship. I didn't want to join them. Grief and self-blame had centered me and made me all *Mando* again.

I found the strength to ask where *Kal'buir* was. I directed the question at Ny and Ruu, but it was Besany who answered.

"He's taking it hard, Bardan." She hooked a hand on my arm and led me aside.

I realized that while I could feel shock and grief bleeding off her in the Force, she looked more composed than anyone else. Someone had had to become the emotional

stabilizer of the group, and I suppose I should have expected Besany to take on that role.

"Where's *buir*?" I asked her.

"Just leave him be for now, Bardan, please. Ny already tried, but…" She shook her head.

"Does he blame me?" It was a stupid, selfish worry, but it leaped out of my mouth.

"What do you think?" Besany said harshly. "He blames *himself*, Bardan."

Of course he would. That was *Kal'buir*.

"What can we do for him?" I asked.

"I don't know. Grief is something you have to work out for yourself. When Etain died, he…"

She trailed off. We both knew this was worse than even Order 66. That night, the order of the galaxy had been torn apart. This time something more important had been broken: family.

I looked back at Laseema. Ruu and Ny had gathered around her and all three were staring at the young boy in Ruu's arms, like they were expecting you, *Kad'ika*, to take their pain away.

"Laseema's doing better than I expected," Besany said. "Better than Ordo or Jaing."

"Mereel's been almost catatonic. Part of him's just *gone*. It's too much for them."

"What about you?"

I blinked, surprised, then looked away. "I'm okay."

"Bardan, it wasn't your fault."

"I knew you'd say that."

"You might believe it, one day." Her tone softened with sad knowledge.

"We'll see."

"Do you know how they died?" she asked. "I mean, I think the others might want to know."

"Kom'rk and A'den were keeping fighters off our backs. They were shot down. Atin, he was fighting… a woman. One of Palpatine's special agents."

I couldn't call her *Sith*. The word had been so many things for me all my life: first bogeyman, then another breed of hated Force-user, and finally a label for an evil genius I'd never met. All the while it had been abstract. I'd never actually expected to face one in combat, or to hate one like I'd never hated anyone before.

At that point I didn't know whether or not Corr had killed her, but I prayed she'd died, slowly and painfully in those tunnels, right next to Atin's body.

"What about Prudii?" Besany asked. "What about Maze and Zey?"

Nobody had said my old master's name since we left Belsavis. Even hearing it seemed surreal somehow. I'd spent so long trying to distance myself from the man and everything he represented, only to have him elbow his way back into my life, and after some struggle I'd almost gotten used to that. Suddenly he was gone, gone for good, just like I'd always wanted, but never the way I'd wanted it. I was too stunned to feel anything about Zey at all.

"I don't know," I said finally.

Besany didn't ask me if I was okay again. She knew me, and she knew when not to press any more. She put her hand on my arm again and kept it there, and we stood in silence watching people move slowly through the hangar: the clones huddled in their grief, the women around the child, Uthan and Mirdalan drifting and lost, and in the far corner the Jedi children, terrified but alive, whom so much had been sacrificed to save.

For a moment, but only a moment, I hated them too.

There wasn't much Scout could do for the children rescued from Belsavis, but she felt she had to try. The children were a mix of species but they all gave off the same harrowed emotions through the Force. Ash, the Margolis woman, and their Ho'din handler Ustu did their best to move the children out of the hangar and to someplace more welcoming. Ash in particular tried to use

the Force to calm them, and Kina Ha had her own powers to amplify those calming efforts, but even the ancient Jedi Master could only do so much.

Scout had to wonder if that was how she'd looked to the Mandalorians when she'd first shown up on their door: confused, scared, helpless, pathetic.

She wished she could say she felt any different right then.

Scout helped get the kids up to one of the garden domes. Being among nature seemed to calm them and remind them of the planet they'd fled from. Kina Ha, Margolis, and Ustu stayed with the kids while Ash hooked her arm into Scout's and led her back toward the hangar.

The Jedi woman had done a pretty good job projecting confidence for the kids, but now that they were alone Scout could tell she was still reeling from the deaths of her friends, just like everyone else.

"Master Altis went over to the flagship with Walon Vau. That was a couple hours ago. I'm not sure when they'll be back." Scout explained, though the full sweep of things had gone well over her head.

"We heard about the siege at Bavinyar," said Ash. "I don't know what we can do about that. I wish there was something, but I don't think there is."

The thought of the settlements on Bavinyar being wiped out, island by island, filled Scout with horror and helplessness. "There has to be *something*. We're Jedi. We can't let all those people die."

"We can barely protect ourselves right now. And those Mandalorians…" Ash shook her head. Strands of red-brown hair fell over her face. "They've taken a lot worse than we have."

They stepped out into the hangar to see the group still clustered in front of *Aay'han*. Scout's heart fell, not just because of the pain they were obviously in, but because of how separate she felt from them, from anyone.

Being a Jedi was about saving lives, protecting people, bringing justice to the galaxy. Scout had never been a good

Jedi but she'd believed heart and soul that she had to try and do it right. Now she felt as lost and helpless as those children, uncertain of the first step to take.

She heard the sound of thrust engines and turned her attention to the hangar mouth. A two-seater Starchaser flew in through the gap, over the docked freighters, and settled in the rear of the hangar.

"Master Altis," Ash said, clearly relieved, and Scout followed the older woman across the bay. They were joined by Ranik Solusar a middle-aged member of Altis' Jedi.

The Mandalorians, too, were walking in that direction. Scout didn't understand why until the fighter's cockpit popped open and the black-armored figure of Walon Vau jumped onto the deck, followed by Altis himself.

Lord Mirdalan dashed up to its owner, all six legs pumping, but Vau barely noticed. He pointed at Uthan and called, "Doc! Get over here! We've got to talk!"

The scientist stepped out of the group, strangely nonplussed. Vau grabbed her roughly by the shoulder and pulled her aside, probably talking, though with his helmet on Scout couldn't see his lips move.

Altis, meanwhile, went straight for Ash and Scout. He had a look of surprising determination on his normally soft, genial face.

"Ash, Ranik, come with me. You too, Scout," he added, though he'd barely even looked at her.

"What is it, Djinn?" Solusar fell quickly in step and Scout did her best to follow.

"We're going to try and evacuate people from Bavinyar," he said as they entered the hallway.

Ash skidded to a halt and Scout did too. "Master, is that even *possible*?"

"There's a plan being considered right now. We need to prepare. That means we should start by taking as many people as we can, including the children, and sending them

somewhere safe, including your son Kam. We have enough ships for it, I think."

Ash was still gaping. "The Imps have almost twenty ships. They have a *huge* interdiction net. They'd destroy us before we even get close to the planet."

"Ash, we can't just sit here and do nothing, not while thousands of people are dying. We wouldn't be Jedi if we did. We have to *act*. And don't call me *Master*."

"He's right," Solusar prodded. "We've got to help."

Ash swallowed. "This is what got Geith, Callista, and Nor Vald all killed."

"I'm not going to hide," Altis said firmly. "I'm not going to play Yoda and sit in my temple and send other beings off to die because I don't want to get *attached* to something. I get my hands dirty, *mine*. I always have. You know that."

"I do, but this isn't a fight we can win."

"If we work with Skirata and Syne, there might be a way," said Solusar.

"Exactly. For that, we'll just have to trust our new friends. *And* the Force." Altis gave a wry smile. His attention shifted, finally, to Scout. "I won't tell you what to do. I was never your Master. You should probably get on a ship with the children and get far away from here. It will be safer."

Those were exactly the words Scout didn't want to hear. Her hands balled to fists and she stared up at the old man. "I'm a Jedi, sir. I want to *do* something, not run."

His expression softened. "Nothing Ash said was false. What we're going to be doing is exceedingly dangerous. In fact, we'll probably all get killed."

The typical good humor had drained from his voice. He was deathly serious. Scout mind flicked back to all the dead Jedi she'd known, from Master Maruk to Whie to Arligan Zey, and to her own surprise she didn't feel afraid.

"I have to do this." She swallowed. "I was on a mission with Master Yoda once. I know you and the Mandos don't

like him. You think he was cold and detached but you're *wrong*. He was ancient, and he knew more love and pain than anyone."

For a second Altis, the revered Jedi master, flinched from the accusation in her gaze.

"Master Yoda told me even one candle can hold back the night. He said we can *be* that candle, or we can be the night, we just have to chose. I've thought about that every day since the Order fell, every single *day*. That's what I want to be now."

His expression relaxed into one of those easy smiles. He put a hand on her shoulder and said, "You shine brightly, Scout. Come with me, then. We have to get ready."

When the news had come in from Belsavis, Kal Skirata had been in one of *Chu'unthor*'s small kitchens with Ny and Ruusaan. Altis had come to deliver it. His voice had cracked with honest sorrow and he'd said, over and over, how sorry he was. Ny and his daughter put their hands on him and told him it wasn't his fault, there was nothing he could have done.

Being surrounded by so much kindness had made it worse. He'd thrown off their touch and shouted at them to leave. When Ny had insisted on staying he'd knocked a pan off the hot stove, spilling scaling water on the floor, and thrown an empty glass against the wall, shattering it. He'd nearly struck his daughter before the look of fear on her face had stopped him with shame.

They'd retreated, all of them, leaving him alone in his pain. The door had hissed shut, drowning out all sounds except his own ragged breathing and the blood pounding in his ears. He'd sunk to a floor glinting with shattered glass and spilled water, back to the wall, knees against his chest and hands on his head.

He stayed there for a very long time. They marched through his head, a grim parade: Ruu and Ny staring at him in shock and hurt when they'd only tried to help. A'den,

Prudii, Kom'rk, Atin, Gilamar, even Jilka, Maze, and Zey, all ghosts. He knew they'd never leave him.

He stayed there and no one dared intrude on his grief. He hated himself for that, too; Ordo and Jaing, Laseema and Besany, even Scout must have been broken with their own flavors of grief, and as their father he should have been there for them. He should have been able to do something to help them heal, but he'd failed them just as he'd failed the dead.

When the door to the kitchen hissed open he didn't look up. He could see, just barely, a pair of black boots and *beskar*-plated legs in the doorway, and he realized that he'd been expecting them all along.

"Look at you now, Kal," a familiar voice grated. "Look at you now."

Walon Vau was the last person he'd wanted to see. Even Altis or another of the *shabla* Jedi would have been better than Vau, but as punishment went, he knew he deserved much worse.

He looked up at the black-suited figure hovering over him. Vau hadn't brought his helmet. Seen from below his face looked old and gaunt, like someone had carved away his flesh with knife-strokes.

"More bad news," he said. "Something happened to Darman and Niner. One's dead, one's in prison on a star destroyer. We're not sure which is which."

Anger came from nowhere. He sprung to his feet. He grabbed Vau by the edges of his chest armor and threw him hard against the kitchen counter. He found himself spitting rage into Vau's cool gray eyes, his pinched aristocratic face.

Anger wilted as fast as it had come. Energy drained and he fell back into the exact same pit of self-reproach he'd jumped out of. The new loss should have hurt more. The *unknown* of it should have been an extra knife-twist in the gut. But instead he felt the same, as if he'd reached his personal limit of grief.

"Scorch ended up with Niner's *buy'c*," Vau explained. "We're lucky he did. I've been talking to him. We're hatching a plan to get our boys home."

Confusion broke through the grief. His limbs felt heavy but he kept clinging to Vau's armor. "What 'we'?"

"A lot's been going on. You've been out of the loop, Kal. I've let you indulge in self-pity *osik* long enough. It's time to get in the game."

"Tell me, *shabuir*. What 'we'? Jedi? That friendly fleet from Belsavis?"

"All of the above."

Skirata had known Walon Vau for decades, and he'd never been more surprised by him than now.

"I'm not working with the *shabla* Jedi anymore," Skirata snarled. "Not working with *anyone*. I should have listened to you. You were right. Is that what you want me to say? What you came here for? You were *right*. We should have let those little kids die, we should have sold Altis to the Imps. If we had, then *Kom'ika* and *At'ika* and-"

Vau hit him with a closed fist. Pain shot out from his cheekbone and numbed his face, but only for a second. His arm shot up for a return punch. Vau blocked it with a forearm and punched him again. His head snapped back and he fell against the opposite kitchen-counter, then sunk to the floor, right where he'd been when Vau entered.

The other man dropped to a crouch and stared Skirata in the eyes. "We don't have *shabla* time for this, Kal. Get your *osik* together and do it *now*."

"Easy for you to say, you *chakaar,*" Skirata snarled as he touched his stinging cheek. "You never gave one fat *shab* for any of those clones-"

Vau punched him again. His head snapped back against the wooden cupboard.

"Don't you *dare,* Kal," Vau snarled. "Atin was my boy too, remember?"

Skirata groaned, "You beat him so hard he ran to me."

"He couldn't handle a tough *buir*. He needed a soft one like you."

"That's not true-"

"Don't even *say* it, Kal. You *shabbed* up your blood family so bad let those boys into your heart when you *knew* what was going to happen to them. You *knew* from the moment we joined Jango on Kamino. You got soft, you lost perspective, and now you're wallowing in *shabla* self-pity. Well, my other boys are still alive and I'm going to *do* something besides cry on the floor. I already let Sev down. I'm not failing the rest.

"We're getting Scorch, Fixer, and Boss out, and we're getting Niner or Dar too, whoever's left. If we have to join hands with the *jetii* and the Bavinyar fleet, fine. We'll be using them as much as they're using us."

Kal ran a hand beneath his nose. He saw only a little blood. "Explain," he ordered.

Vau explained. He talked about Grant's siege and ultimatum, about Syne and Slayke's combined fleets, about how the Omega and Delta boys were on a star destroyer en route to Bavinyar along with a handful of Jedi prisoners from Belsavis. He talked about his conversations with Scorch, the impromptu lab he'd thrown Uthan into, Altis' mad plan to play savior to a planetful of trapped civilians, and Syne's madder plan to break through the interdiction field.

Skirata listened to it all, and when Vau was done he said, "That's crazy. That's absolutely *nuts*."

"You're damn right it is. The one good thing is, it's *so* nuts Grant'll never expect it."

"There's got to be another way to get our boys off that destroyer. We can't go charging in, no matter what Uthan cooks up. It's a *shabla* destroyer and we're half strength."

"Well, about that." Vau allowed a rare smile; it made him look even more vicious. "Jaing's been making some calls. He says we've got backup, less than an hour out."

"Backup? From *where*?"

"Mandalore, *di'kut*, where do you think?"

"Mandalore?" Skirata's mind reeled. "You mean Levet and Sull and-"

"And Bralor's kids and a couple more. Our boys aren't the only clones who want to live real lives."

"And they're coming *here*? Are you sure they're not followed? There's still Death Watch and the Imps and-"

"I hear they cut a deal with Shysa to get off-planet without the Imps knowing. Don't ask, I don't know. Maybe they'll explain it when they get here."

Stupid hope was bubbling up and Skirata tried to shove it into a hole where it belonged. He'd had enough of hope. "Even another boat full of *Mando*s can't take out an entire Imp fleet."

"I know, and if it gets too hairy we cut and run once we get our boys. Altis and Syne can fend for themselves."

A day ago he would have felt guilty about abandoning Altis, probably the only Jedi he'd ever met whom he'd actually *liked*, who actually seemed to give a damn about *people* instead of rules and dogma and Sith bogeymen.

Now it was different. Vau was right, but he was also wrong. Skirata had gone soft and laid himself open to the pain of losing his sons, but the same pain renewed his determination.

"Okay," Skirata said. "Fine. Let's get our boys back."

Vau nodded and got to his feet. He held a hand down but Skirata shook it off. He braced himself against the cupboard and pushed himself up. After steadying wobbly legs he followed Vau to the door.

When it slid open, Skirata stepped into a crowded hallway, and every eye was on him. Ordo, Mereel, and Jaing stood along one wall. Laseema stood with Besany's arm around her shoulders and Fi's hand placed gently on her arm. Corr had one arm resting in sling but a soft smile on his face

Ny and Ruusaan were conspicous in their absence. They'd finally seen him at his worst and he might have

scared them off forever, just when it felt like he'd put together a *real* family instead of a shelter for wayward clones.

Right in front was Jusik, *Bard'ika*, with deep pain in his eyes and an apology on his lips.

"It's okay," Skirata cut him off. "It's okay, son."

He fell into Jusik's arms. His face pressed against the younger man's shoulder and it stung his fresh wounds. They all gathered around him, touched his shoulders, his hair, his neck. He even felt Lord Mirdalan snake its long body through the crowd and brush his legs.

When he disengaged from Jusik he found himself facing Ordo. His put his hands on his first son's shoulders and said, "We've got one more mission to do."

"I know, *buir*."

"It's going to be hard. We could lose more."

"It's okay, *buir*." Ordo reached up and gently laid a hand on his father's face, careful not to touch the darkening bruises. "We're getting everybody home."

Everybody still left, Skirata thought as tears stung his bruised cheeks.

Everybody left.

22

"To be honest, I was surprised when I heard that Boss, Scorch, and Fixer had decided, not just to desert, but to help us capture Valediction. *That wasn't just dereliction of duty; even treason was a soft word for it. They'd never gone full* Mando *like your father and his squadron, but apparently even Walon Vau had been enough to instill in them the desire to be free of outside power, call it Republic or Empire. When surprise faded I felt ashamed of it; I realized that I'd fallen into the common trap of thinking of them as clones first instead of men."*

They stood in a tight circle in the storage room, helmets off, voices lowered. Joc had his arms over his chest and was leaning forward, eyes darting from one identical face to another.

"I always knew you guys were nuts," he said, "But this is a whole new level."

"We're only going to get one chance at this," Boss said.

Once Scorch relayed Vau's proposal, he'd agreed with shocking swiftness. Even Fixer had seemed hesitant at first, but not Boss. Apparently his good-soldier act went less deep than Scorch had thought, even after all they'd been through.

They'd agreed, collectively, to bring Joc into it. He was no Sev, but he'd been a good squadmate for almost a year now, and they weren't going to leave another brother behind. They'd all been dragging guilt about leaving Sev

on Kashyyyk. If they had some chance at redemption, this was it and they all knew it.

Right now, Joc was struggling to wrap his head around it. Scorch knew the feeling, and he'd already talked it over twice with Vau.

"Let me get this straight," Joc said, "You want to help a bunch of crazy Mandos jack this star destroyer."

"I double-checked the specs," Fixer said. "A Vic's not that different from a Venator. They're bringing a ship that's hard to spot, so we just need to kill one corner of the sensor grid on the aft-dorsal part of the ship, by the emergency airlock."

"And you're there to let them in. Okay. If you just wanted to run, I could get that," Joc said, and Scorch thought they were halfway there. "This isn't just desertion. This is full-blown mutiny. I'm not signing up for that."

"Grant's blowing thousands of civvies up on Bavinyar right now," Fixer said. "I didn't sign up for that either."

"It's a hostile planet."

"No it's not," Boss said. "It formally surrendered over a month ago. Grant's just bombarding them to draw Syne out. If the Seps were doing it, we'd all be hopping mad."

"Damn it," Joc shook his head. "I just want this war to be *over*."

"It can be. You help us and you don't have to fight for the Imps or anybody else ever again."

"You just told me your Mando convert buddies are all fugitives. Doesn't sound like much of a life."

"At least you get to live it," Scorch said. "A *full* life."

Scorch saw the hope in Joc's eyes, and then the doubt. "If this fails, we're done. They won't even shove us in the brig like Niner or Dar, it's just over."

"It's over no matter what. The Republic never gave one *osik* about us and the Empire's even worse." Scorch was surprised at how unafraid he felt. "I don't want to die fighting for people who don't care about us."

"Do you really believe Skirata can slow our aging?"

"Our old sarge said so. I believe him."

"You deserve a real life, *Joc'ika*," said Fixer. "We all do."

Joc ran a hand through the black stubble of his hair. "I'm not one of your wanna-be Mandos."

"It doesn't matter," Scorch said. "We already lost Sev. We don't want to lose you too."

Joc swallowed; something wet glistened in his eyes. He blinked them dry and said, "I'd feel a hell of a lot better about this whole mutiny stuff except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"I know the captain of this ship, remember? Pellaeon. I met him, fought under him. He's a good man. He treated Torrent Company like real people. He was one of the only mongrels who did that for us. I don't want to stab him in the back."

"We don't have to kill Pellaeon," Boss offered. "We can make it a priority to take him alive."

"And then what? Stuff him in an escape pod? The Imps'll execute him anyway, if he's lucky. If he survives, his career's dead. He doesn't deserve that."

"We could offer him an out, if he wants to desert too," Boss offered.

"He wouldn't do that. He's too officer-and-gentleman."

The group fell into frustrated silence. Scorch wanted to tell Joc that Pellaeon was just one man and that a whole shipful of clones were about to get the option of a new lease on life. That might assuage his conscience, or it might not.

When faced with Vau's offer, moral nuances hadn't figured into Scorch and his *vode*'s considerations. They'd been raised too *Mando* to care about ethics either way. Vau and Skirata had always acted on the same basic principle: Know what you want and take it. They knew what they wanted- freedom for their *vod* in prison, and long lives for the clones they cared about.

All that was left for them was to take it.

"We'll make it a priority to take Pellaeon alive," Boss said. "At least we'll give him a choice."

"It won't be a choice," said Joc. "Not for him."

There wasn't any point in trying to rationalize it. Scorch said, "We'll do our best to help your guy, but you have to chose your priorities, Joc. Do you want to live a full life, a real life?"

"You know I do."

"Then that's it. It's done. Choice made."

"I don't like screwing people over."

"That's how the galaxy works now." Fixer and Boss shot him angry looks but he pressed, "You use somebody or they you use. *Shab*, you're a *clone*, you've know that since the start, it's all these other *di'kute* who didn't figure it out until Order Sixty-Six. You were *made* to be used by Palps and the Jedi. All of us were. So you can forgive me for saying I'd ready to use somebody else for a change."

"It's still not right."

"*Shab* right. It's the way it is."

"I hate the way it is."

"I do too, but you can't change it. You just have to choose what you want and take it."

Scorch knew Boss and Fixer were glaring daggers at him but he didn't take his eyes off Joc.

Slowly, he saw the other man's scowl wilt into a look of weary acceptance. Joc said, "Okay. I'm in. But are four of us really going to be enough?"

"We've got a whole boatful of *Mandos* on the way," Fixer reminded him.

"Yeah, so what? You need more than that. You need somebody to blind the sensors to they *can* land-"

"Sabotage 101," Fixer said. "Didn't get that lesson on Kamino?"

"What about the comm systems? How do we keep Pellaeon from calling for help once he realizes he's been boarded?"

"I can knock those out too."

"Once comm goes out Pellaeon'll know something's up. You'll lose the element of surprise."

"We don't have to kill outside communications entirely. We can run the comm systems through a feedback loop so they get the same white noise and think it's running like normal. I've seen it done."

"Seen it. Can you *do* it? *While* you disable the exterior sensors too?" Joc raised a brow.

Fixer opened his mouth, shut it again. Even with four people it would be tight, there was no denying.

Joc thought for a moment, then said, "Soru's probably the best comm tech in the Five-oh-First."

"It's not safe to bring the Sixers into this," Boss said. "They're good men, but Kol would never go for it. I don't think Brant would either."

"But Soru might." Scorch said. Out of all the Sixers, he'd shown the most dissatisfaction with the new Empire and the clones' lot in general.

"Just 'cos you chug ale together doesn't mean he's going to mutiny with you," Boss said.

"It's worth a shot," Fixer said. "If we're really serious about this."

"We're dead serious." Scorch looked at his sarge. "Boss, let me try. Please."

Boss nodded reluctantly. "Okay. We'll get him alone."

"We?"

"That's right, both of us. Let's all head back to the locker room. Joc, Fixer, mix in with the others. Act casual as you can. We'll separate Soru and have a talk."

"Sounds good," Joc said. "Let's get it over with."

They all stared for the door, but Scorch grabbed Boss and Joc by the shoulder. Fixer stopped too, and he took a moment to look each of them in the eye.

"*Vode an*," he said firmly.

Fixer knew it. Boss knew it. Joc was not Mando but even he knew it.

"Brothers all," he said.

“Damn right,” Scorch nodded. “Let's go.”

Gilad Pellaeon was about to walk into a room with a powerful, unpredictable, and incredibly deadly Force-user already responsible for slaughter, but all he could think about was Hallena Devis.

Their meeting in the brig- the anger, the indignation, the suppressed desire- was all something he should have seen coming. There had always been differences between them- that had been part of the attraction- but in the new galactic order any idiot could have seen that those differences were enough to tear their lives apart.

After four years he'd sometimes been able to convince himself that he’d moved on from Hallena. Now there was no question that his wounds were still bleeding. Worse, they were hours away a combat situation and he couldn't concentrate on the task at hand. He would have to try and force Vernedet to take command, again. It was the only way.

A hand touched his shoulder. He jumped but the hand remained. He saw Vernedet at his side, staring with concern, and looked away in shame. He placed a free hand on his friend's and forcibly removed it.

“Are you going to stand in front of the door to sick bay forever, Captain?” Vernedet asked. “You might get in someone’s way.”

Pellaeon exhaled. “No. Let's get this over with.”

He punched the access panel and the door slid open. *Valediction*'s medical bay was, for the moment, empty except for one bed. Ameesa Darys, looking almost helpless in her loose white hospital gown, sat upright with her hands folded in her lap. The doctor, a white-haired human woman, stood by her side with a datapad in her hand.

Pellaeon addressed the older woman first. “Doctor Rhoades, you said your patient wanted to see me.”

“She requested you, sir.”

Darys didn't speak. Pellaeon kept his attention on the doctor. “What is your evaluation of her condition?”

“I've stitched the wound in her side and sutured the damaged internal organs. Frankly, Captain, this woman needs a week in a bacta tank.”

“The doctor's ministrations will be quite fine,” Darys said.

It took effort for Pellaeon to look into the black pits of her eyes. “Miss Darys, for your own well-being, you should stay confined to sick bay until the doctor is satisfied.”

“Captain, we do not have time. When we arrive at Bavinyar the Jedi will be waiting.”

“Is the Force telling you that?” Pellaeon asked without sarcasm. He'd never understood how Jedi powers worked.

“It's simple, Captain. We know Syne and Slayke are in league with the Jedi.”

“At Belsavis, yes. However, we have no concrete evidence placing them at Bavinyar. No ships have arrived in that system since Admiral Grant began his siege.”

“The only way to be certain, Captain, is to interrogate Master Plett.”

Pellaeon had specialized interrogators aboard his ship. He also had multiple squadrons of 501st commandos trained to handle Force-users. Compared to Darys, though, they'd all be children in an ancient Jedi Master's hands.

A Jedi Master at full power, anyway.

“Miss Darys, Plett is currently being kept in our brig under heavy sedation.”

“Move him to a suitable chamber and wake him.”

Doctor Rhoades looked alarmed. “Captain, we've pumped a frankly staggering amount of sedative gas into that chamber just to keep him unconscious.”

“Can you wake him quickly with the proper drugs?” Darys asked.

Rhoades swallowed. “It's possible. I'd have to review Ho'din biochemistry.”

“Please do.” Darys looked back at Pellaeon. “Captain, have Plett moved at once. I will be ready in ten minutes.”

“Miss Darys, Master Plett is, as I understand it, a very old, very powerful Jedi Master. There's no telling what kind of damage he could do if he really wants to.”

“I will restrain him.”

“He is being restrained now.”

“He needs to be woken up and interrogated.”

Pellaeon wanted to shout at her, but all he allowed was a fast sigh. He knew Vernedet was seething behind him, but the lieutenant held his tongue as well.

That was the thing about Force-users. Sometimes they asked you to trust them, and they used their magic powers to mind-meld with your malfunctioning missile systems and coax them to fire. Other times they asked you to let a being of undetermined power loose, risking thousands of lives in the process.

It was no way to run a navy. It was no way to run *anything*, but it was the way the Republic had operated and despite Palpatine's zealous anti-Jedi purge, it seemed to be the way the Empire was run too.

“Doctor Rhoades,” he said, “Please prepare a drug suitable to wake a very sedated Ho'din. Lieutenant Vernedet, with me.”

He didn’t give the doctor a chance to object, and hew knew she would. They walked out of the infirmary fast. The door barely slid shut behind them before Vernedet started cursing.

“They could tear the whole kriffing ship apart! Gil, you can't allow this!”

“I was told to accommodate Miss Darys on all matters concerning Jedi, *Lieutenant*.”

“Of course. Captain. But this is too dangerous. We-”

“We need all the intel Plett has, she's right about that,” Pellaeon said as they stepped into the lift tube and punched the button for the auxiliary command deck.

Vernedet settled into a wordless scowl as the lift hummed into motion. Silence was the last thing Pellaeon needed. His whole ship was about to be torn apart by

warring Force-users but his mind kept falling back on Hallena when it wasn't being actively grabbed by something else

When the door opened, they stepped out into the hallway, Vernedet leading his captain. The lieutenant said, "Sir, should I oversee the removal of the prisoner from the brig?"

"It's all right, I'll take care of it."

Vernedet stopped and spun around. A different kind of anger was on his face. "Captain, I request the responsibility. Let me handle this."

He forced a smile. "Afraid I'll muck up a simple prisoner transfer?"

"We both know there's more prisoners on that cell block."

"You're quite right. A brutalized child and a fratricidal clone."

"And *her*. Gil, we are less than three hours out from Bavinyar. We don't have time for this."

"My personal business is my own, Mynar."

"It's not personal. That's the whole point. You just asked me to take command because you thought she was going to ruin your judgment."

"Not *think*, I'm afraid."

"Then why go see her?"

"Mynar, just think about Aylin. Imagine if she disappeared, and you had no idea where she was, and you'd half given her up for dead when suddenly she pops back into your life. You're not sure if she's changed or you've changed, but your relationship is suddenly so very different from what it was. Forget rank and responsibility and everything else. Just ask yourself, what would you do?"

"She isn't your wife."

"I asked her to be."

Vernedet's mouth popped open, snapped shut, and opened again. "She refused?"

"Right before she disappeared."

"Then forget about it. I'm sorry, Gil, but it's done. You have to realize that. Never see her again."

"If it were Aylin in there, would you?"

Vernedet's shook his head. "She's *not* Aylin. The woman there is a traitor to the Empire and an ally of the Jedi. But the worst thing, Gil, the worst thing by *far*, is that she's taken one of the best officers in the whole damn navy and turned him inside out just be *being* here."

He was right. Every single word he said was true. Pellaeon stood there, hands clenched at his side, and knew there was no logical argument to give.

So instead he pulled rank.

"Lieutenant, report to the bridge immediately. I will handle the prisoner transfer. You are in effective command until I return. Is that understood?"

Vernedet stared. His expression was an awful cocktail of anger, sadness, and pity that Pellaeon could hardly bear.

But he was a good officer, so he snapped his hand up in a salute, said, "Yes, Captain," and walked away.

Pellaeon watched him go. He waited until his back was halfway down the hall, then turned and marched to the lift.

He didn't know what he was marching toward. He just knew he had to go.

It hadn't taken long to separate Soru out from his squadmates. Boss and Scorch quickly pinned him in the same storage room they'd just left.

Whereas Joc had laid out his moral dilemmas for all to see, Soru just seemed confused.

"Okay, one more time," he said, "You *actually* think you can commandeer this ship, a *star destroyer*?"

"We have a good plan," Scorch insisted. He didn't know if it really was good, but he had to believe in it.

"Okay, assuming your tailored virus thingy works, and you secure Pellaeon, *and* your Mando pals actually know how to work this thing, what then? As I understand it,

Bavinyar's got a huge interdiction net over it. We can't just hop to hyperspace when we want to."

"We're just one piece of a bigger strategy," Boss said. "We have to trust the rest of it's covered."

"Trust." Soru shook his head. "Seriously, though, you want to jack a *star destroyer*?"

"You know us Mandos," Scorch said, "We never do things halfway."

"Guess we didn't know you like we thought." Soru eyed him. "You know Kol's never going to go for this. He *hates* deserters. Thinks they're cowards."

"Then we keep him in the dark," Boss said.

"Sure, then he can get whatever crazy virus you plan to sic on this ship."

"It's not fatal," Scorch reminded him. "What about Brant and Olin?"

"Olin... I don't know. He might. He likes to talk about what he'd do when he 'retired.' Used to, anyway."

"And Brant?" Boss pressed. Scorch was still surprised his own squad leader had agreed to mutiny; he didn't expect a second to.

"Brant talks a lot about the troops. You know, all of us clones, sticking together like brothers. A little like Niner."

That could have meant anything. He could mutiny in order to get longer lives for all the clones on *Valediction*, or he could be repelled at the thought of fighting his own brothers for the sake of some *Mando* thugs.

There was no way to know, so it was better to be safe.

"Forget Brant," Scorch said. "Olin too. No poinit taking risks."

Soru looked directly at Scorch. "You took a huge one coming to me like this. I could report you right now."

"And you'd throw away forty years of life." Scorch said. Soru liked living too much. He was like Fi that way.

Soru sighed. He looked uncharacteristically grave. "You said something about sabotaging the comm system so they can't call Grant for help."

"Fixer was talking about a feedback loop," Boss said. "We want to keep Pellaeon from figuring out we've sabotaged his ship until it's too late."

Soru's eyes narrowed in thought. "It's possible. I think. It won't be easy."

"We'll need Fixer to kill the sensors by the emergency airlock. Can you do it alone?"

"I'd need to see schematics for a Vic-two."

"Shouldn't be hard for one of Vader's Fists," Scorch said. "By the way, Boss, you think we should find somebody's white kits to hide in, or should we stay black?"

The usual white armor would hide them amongst the rank and file of *Valediction*'s regular clone squad, but it would be a lot harder to pull rank on someone in elite 501st armor.

"I say stick to black." Soru added a smile. "Way more stylish, you know?"

"Oh, we're all about style," Scorch agreed. "Shouldn't mutiny without looking good."

Naming their crime was a mistake; it killed any easy mood before it could develop.

"Listen," Boss said, "We've got a timetable from Vau. This is going to be very tight and we've only got a couple hours to plan."

"Should we get Joc and Fixer?"

"Neg that. Don't want to make ourselves look like a clique. It'll draw too much attention. We hack it out now, then tell Joc and Fixer later. Separately."

Soru put his hands to his sides and nodded like a good soldier. "Okay, Boss. Where do we start?"

There wasn't much for Pellaeon to do after he arrived in the detention block. Four black-armored 501st soldiers appeared, two carrying rifles against their chests while two more carried a bier between them. Pellaeon stood to one side as one of the white-armored guards opened the door.

The 501st troops marched in with the bier and came out a minute later with an insensate Ho'din lying between them,

one arm dangling limp over the edge. The armed men fell in to the front and back of the group and marched off to the service lift, which would take them to the interrogation room where Darys waited.

Pellaeon was alone with the guards, again. He turned to the closest one and asked, “Which cell has the child we took from Bavinyar?”

“Cell 2F, sir.”

“Make sure she's ready to go the moment we arrive in the Bavinyar system. Commodore Zaarin plans to fly to Admiral Grant's flagship in his fastest shuttle. I want that girl on it.”

“Understood, sir.”

He could get the girl far away from the woman who'd murdered her brother, at least for a little while. It was a tiny thing, and probably wouldn't matter in the end; whatever the Inquisitorius had planned for her wouldn’t be pleasant. Still, he felt better about himself for doing it.

Then he walked over to the door to Hallena's cell. He stood in front of it and tried to remember all the many good reasons not to step through again, but somehow none of them came.

He input his captain's command override and stepped through. Hallena was sitting on the bed where he'd left her. This time her legs were bent and she rested her hands on her knees. She looked up at Pellaeon and didn't move.

“We have nothing to talk about,” she croaked. All righteous her anger seemed to have deserted her.

She was right, just like Vernedet, but he found himself sitting at the edge of her bed. She didn't pull her legs back further, only stared at him.

“I want you to understand,” he said. “I have a duty. I have thousands of lives, on this ship, and they’re my responsibility. If I abandon my duty, like you did, those men could be hurt, even killed.”

When she spoke again her voice was softer. “So you're still you after all.”

"And you're still you."

He tried to smile. She didn't.

"If it's any consolation," he said, "You are not our... interrogator's primary concern. Master Plett is. She's with him now."

"Is this 'interrogator' the witch who captured me?"

"The same."

"Gil, she killed a *child*. Is *that* the person you're taking orders from?"

He stared at his hands. They curled into fists against his thighs.

"I can protect you from Darys. I'll find a way. Maybe, when we get to Bavinyar, I don't know, fake an escape somehow. Let you steal shuttle. There has to be a way. I can figure it out. I'm... I'm captain of this ship..." He trailed off and kept staring at his hands.

Hallena said, "Saving me won't salve your conscience."

"It would be a start."

"There are other ways."

"I can't abandon my position, I *can't*. I just told you why. And Darys, that woman, she is not *all* the Empire is."

"They still have you. That just means Palpatine's tricked one decent man into following him."

"More than one. My first officer here is Mynar Vernedet, my friend. Did I tell you about him?" He glanced over to see her nodding. "It was a fluke, but we ended up on the same ship again. Mynar is... a better man than me. He's furious right now, knowing I'm down here with you. He thinks I'm betraying my duty."

"Doesn't sound too good to me."

"He's a *decent* man, with a family. He knows his duty and he does it. He knows someone has to keep this crew safe while I..." He looked back at his hands.

"While you what, Gil? What are you down here for?" She sounded so tired.

"I don't know," he admitted. "It's been a long four years without you. I know that much."

"The Gil I knew could get over a lot of women in four years."

"There were none."

"Well. It was a busy war."

"It wasn't the same after you."

"I'm touched." She sounded honest.

"I kept telling myself I'd find you once the fighting was done. You were... my light at the end of the tunnel."

He felt her fingers, very lightly, touched the side of his face and trail down his neck.

"There's no light, Gil, not for anyone. Not with Palpatine in power. It doesn't matter how many like you or Mynar there are so long as the man on top's as evil as him."

"The galaxy needs order. Someone has to end the fighting."

"There won't be peace with Palpatine in charge." She leaned close. He felt her breath on the side of his face.

His hand snapped up and pulled hers away. He turned his head to see her face in front of his.

"I'm not abandoning my men," he said, "Not for you."

She leaned forward and kissed him. Her mouth was dry and warm. Suddenly her arms had snaked around his shoulders and he was tipping back.

His head bumped the cell wall as he fell onto the bed's hard mattress. Hallena was over him, pinning him, the white rings of her eyes staring into his. For a moment he thought she was going to reach for the service pistol at his belt, but instead her hands reached for his uniform and unsnapped his collar.

"Hallena, please..."

Fingertips felt like water-drops tickling over his chest, across his face. She kissed him again. When she pulled back she whispered, "Enough, Gil. Enough."

"Enough," he echoed, right before she kissed him again, and four years melted into nothing at all.

23

"The bond between Mandalorians is something aruetisse *will never understand. When you've fought with someone, trusted them with your life like they trust you, it builds a special bond, and for a* Mando*, life is nothing* but *fighting, and trusting the beings you fight with. That bond is who and what we are, the* Manda'yaim *manifested through action. It's the kind of trust that can pull people together from far corners of the galaxy. In your time of need they'll answer your clarion call and come running to you. That's what happened at Bavinyar. Without that bond, none of us would be alive today."*

The dreadnaught *Iconoclast* had been A'Sharad Hett's home for eight months. That probably wasn't a long time for most beings, but for a Jedi trained to be ascetic and itinerant, eight months in one place felt like a very long time. The fact that he'd spent so many nights in Syne's bed made the attachment all the stronger.

Five hours wasn't enough time to abandon your home. The crews were rushing to strip her down while at the same time evacuating the ship. All non-essential personnel had already been relocated to Slayke's ships, as well as most of the starfighter wing, including the surviving members of Twin Suns Squadron. Most of the ship's systems would continue to function via the slave circuit programming built into it almost fifty years ago as part of the Katana Fleet project.

As he and Syne stood on a hangar deck that now seemed suddenly empty, even with plenty of crewmen still scurrying about, it struck him that now her and Slayke's crews had been inseparably joined. If any of them survived the coming battle, they would be fighting as a coherent team from this point forward.

As they watched a pair of assault shuttles take off and vector toward Slayke's carrier, the charmingly named *Fat Bastard*, Syne said, "A'Sharad, I want you to accompany the assault team onto the star destroyer."

He looked down at her. "I was planning to stay with *you*."

"You have special skills that may prove very useful to them. Besides, I need you to keep everyone in line. We're sending a bunch of Mandalorians and a squadron of Slayke's commandos. I want someone I know and trust to protect that mission."

"I have other things to protect."

She nodded, slightly. He could feel the storm inside her: fear, anxiety, the brutal knowledge that every thirty minutes more Bavinyari died, but none of it showed on her face.

"If that mission fails, the rest of us are doomed anyway. I need you on it, A'Sharad."

He looked away from her and scanned the hangar. He felt suddenly lonely on a flight deck that had become empty and vast. *Iconoclast* already felt like a hollowed shell.

He realized that, in a strange way, he'd actually been content over the past eight months. His old life had been destroyed, yes, but he'd found a new one completely contained in Jereveth Syne. That life had been full of danger and death but he'd been able to handle it all because he had a warm dark place waiting for him at the end of every day.

None of it was coming back. Even if they survived the day, it wasn't coming back.

He reached down and, softly, placed a hand on Syne's waist. He could feel the child, tiny and outwardly invisible,

growing within her. *This* was what they'd warned him about, the all-consuming attachment that eclipsed all other concerns. For years he'd followed the Jedi brand of passionless duty, so strictly that he'd even put aside the need to avenge his father's death, but he'd left that all behind irrevocably to make a new life that followed no one's rules except his own.

Just like his father.

"If you want to protect our child," Syne said softly, "Go on that mission, A'Sharad."

"I will," he said, though every minute away from them would be painful.

"And don't turn your backs on the Mandalorians either. Don't trust them."

"I'm not a fool."

"I know."

She reached up and gently traced her pale fingertips along the dark Tusken tattoos on his face. She'd never shown outward affection in public like this before.

"Do your duty, A'Sharad, and I'll do mine."

He nodded, and her fingers brushed over his cheek. *Duty* was such a different thing now, but he couldn't imagine living another way.

The new arrivals came on a ship called *Concord Night*, a MandalMotors beauty twice the size of *Aay'han* and coated in black stealth plating. It settled down in the only big open space left on *Chu'unthor*'s flight deck.

Kal'buir was with us as we greeted them The bruises were starting to darken on his face but he didn't show any discomfort. Rav Bralor came down the ramp first, red helmet tucked underarm. As she shook hands with *Kal'buir* and Vau, her daughter Parja quickly threw herself again Fi, knocking him two steps back and clanking their *beskar* chestplates. After her Wad'e Tay'haai came down, joining the other three *Cuy'val dar* for a reunion of sorts, though I could tell Gilamar's absence weighed all of them down.

After that came the former clone troopers. I could recognize Spar by the scars on his face and the sour attitude he invariably projected. Sull I knew from his armor. The four soldiers from Yayax Squadron were clustered together as a herd, though I didn't know Cov, Dev, Jind, and Yover well enough to tell them apart by sight. At the end of the line was Levet, the former ARC commando who'd served with Etain on Qiilura, wearing an expression of mild confusion.

Spar walked right up to the *Cuy'val dar* circle and brashly broke it up. He clapped Vau and Tay'haai on the shoulder-plates and asked *Kal'buir*, "Okay, *ner vod*, where can we get this special soup that's gonna give us normal aging?"

"It's not a soup," *Kal'buir* said, "It's a bone marrow injection and it's a lengthy process. We don't have time for it right now."

"Oh really?" Spar crossed his arms over his chest. "I thought you wanted to make this stuff free to all deserving clones. Are you turning it into *payment* now, Kal?"

"Oh stuff it, you *di'kut*," Vau said. "We've got a very small time window. We go in less than four hours and our doc's busy cooking up a surprise for the Imps."

"What surprise?" asked Sull as he settled alongside Spar.

"We'll explain later," *Kal'buir* said, gruff and business-like, and nobody tried to challenge him. If anything, the darkening spots under his eyes made him look even fiercer than usual. "*Rav'ika*, are you sure you weren't followed? We can't take any more surprises right now."

"Very sure," Bralor nodded. "We cut a deal with Shysa before we left. He helped us slip out from beneath the Imp garrison's nose."

"Having a stealth ship comes in handy for that," Parja added as she and a grinning Fi sauntered over to the group. All the pain and grief seemed to have vanished from my brother now that he had his woman back, but I knew it was only submerged, for him and for us all.

Kal'buir didn't look relieved. “What kind of deal with Shysa?”

“*I* cut the deal,” Spar said. He spread his hands, put on an *osik*-eating grin, and said, “You're looking at the new *Mand'alor*.”

“What?” Vau and *Kal'buir* gaped at once.

“Shysa's been wanting one of us to play-act as Jango's real son for a while,” Fi said. “He even asked me to do it.”

“The first time he came after me I told him to shove it,” Spar shrugged. “But the way he talked about it this time, he just wants me to be the public face while he still handles negotiations with the Imps and with clients, and frankly that's fine by me. Never had the head for politics anyway.”

“You never had a head for anything, *ner vod,*” Sull said.

“Besides,” Tay'haai added, “We needed Shysa's help.”

Kal'buir sighed, “Guess we'll have to take what we can get. I just hope you know what you're doing, *ner vod*.”

Spar's grin wilted a little. “Yeah, me too.”

“Right now I'd like to know what this mission's going to entail,” Tay'haai looked at *Kal'buir* and Vau.

“Typical *Mando* stuff,” Vau said easily. “Board a ship, secure key personnel, then take command. We've even got inside help.”

“Hijacking? Doesn't sound too bad,” Sull said.

Vau laughed; everyone else looked confused.

“We're hijacking a star destroyer,” I said plainly, and everyone's eyes went wide. Stunned silence fell over the group.

It was Parja of all people who said, “You've got to be *shabla* kidding me.”

Kal'buir shook his head. “No time for jokes. Thankfully, we've got help on a couple fronts, otherwise I wouldn't even *consider* something this *mir'osik'la*. First off-”

“Ah,” Vau pointed to the hangar mouth, “Nice timing.”

I saw another shuttle coming into the landing bay. At this point there wasn't much deck space left, so we all crowded beneath *Concord Night*'s hull while the craft landed.

It disgorged some two dozen commandos. They wore a motley variety of armor, nothing near as intimidating as *beskar'gam*, but they moved with military precision. Their apparent captain made a straight line for *Kal'buir* and Vau, but my attention was immediately drawn to the man lingering on the landing ramp. Vau had already warned me that Syne had a Jedi on her crew, and I'd felt his presence the moment the shuttle had entered the hangar.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, a few years shy of middle age. The tanned skin of his face was marked by jagged black tattoos that gave him a predatory look. He wore a simple brown tunic that was itself Jedi-like but what really made him stand out was the pair of lightsabers dangling from his belt.

Our eyes met from across the deck. Slowly, cautiously, while the commandos and Mandalorians started to mingle, we approached each other.

When we came close enough he extended a hand. I shook it I. He said, A'Sharad Hett."

The name was vaguely familiar. A Master and a general. For some reason I associated it with a face masked by wound bandages.

"Bardan Jusik," I said.

His eyes tightened a little, probably with the same dim recognition I'd had, though the *beskar'gam* I was wearing was probably enough explanation as to what I'd become.

His hand stayed in mine as those eyes drifted over my shoulder toward my brothers mingling with the new arrivals. None of them had their helmets on, and it was easy to tell most of them were clones.

I felt something shudder, through his palm and through the Force, before he jerked his hand away. The sensation that faded fast from my senses was like what Scout had felt when she'd first arrived in a settlement full of clones, but different. Whereas Scout's reaction had been one of pure fear, Hett's had mixed fear with other things: anger, and shame most of all.

"They're all deserters from the Grand Army," I told him. "They've joined the Mandalorians. Most of them are my brothers."

"Your brothers?"

"I've been formally adopted into their family."

Hett's face went grim and I wondered if he was going to scold me for attachment. He threw a shield around his emotions and I couldn't get a good sense of him. "You trust them, then."

"Absolutely. Have you... fought many clones since Order 66?"

"None face-to-face. But when the order came down..." He paused; his eyes darkened. "It was kill or be killed."

Not for the first time, I felt grateful not to have to make that choice. I tried to turn the conversation toward something else. "Have you been working with Syne since?"

"I fought against her during the war. Afterward... things changed."

Things had changed for all of us, and they'd changed for me before they had for most. He kept a high wall around his emotions, and I knew I'd never be able to get through it. I also knew not to try.

"You'll be coming with us on the mission, then?"

"Madam Syne believes an extra Jedi would be useful."

She was probably right, but I wasn't cheered. Vau and *Kal'buir* had made very clear that all debts were paid, that we owed Altis and Syne nothing, and that if things looked remotely sour they'd ditch the mission once they'd secured the Delta and Omega clones. At the same time, they couldn't have turned down the offer of a helping commando squad without looking suspicious.

A bunch of commandos they'd prepared themselves for. A Jedi Master was another problem entirely.

I told him honestly, "Welcome to the mission, Master Hett. I hope we both get what we want."

He shook his head slightly. "I'm no one's master now."

I looked this man in the eyes and prayed that I wouldn't have to fight him. I didn't want to hurt him, and I knew deep down that I couldn't if I tried.

Skirata wasn't happy to have a bunch of *aruetiise* commandos and another *shabla* Jedi to drag around on the mission, but there wasn't anything he could do to object either. He left Vau, Bralor, and Tay'haai to brief the newcomers and went off to check on what was left of his family.

Jusik was busy with the new Jedi and Skirata didn't want to get in the middle of that. Clones from all different squads had come together to start loading supplies onto *Concord Night*, with Jaing and Mereel undertaking the process of moving their special communications system out of *Cornucopia* and into the new ships.

Besany and Laseema did their best to pitch in, though the Twi'lek woman was still hobbled by a bad leg and worse grief, so she mostly sat to the side with Venku and watched the others work. The clones had snapped into motion once Bralor's people showed up, and being soldiers, motion had helped them put aside their pain. Besany had adapted to the *Mando* mindset better than Laseema, and Skirata knew it was going to take her a long time to be fully functional after losing Atin. He didn't want her or Besany with them during the raid and still hadn't decided where else they had better be; he had too many things rattling around in his mind to devote much thought to one problem in particular.

To round it off, Altis and his people were off prepping *Chu'unthor* for an act of suicidal idealism, and Scout had apparently been dragged off to help Uthan in the botanists' lab she'd commandeered with Vau's help. Kina Ha had gone off with the kids from Belsavis, and Skirata didn't want to see or even *think* about them right then.

That left Ny and Ruu unaccounted for. He didn't think they'd be with Uthan, and when he caught Ash Jarvee in

the hall, the Jedi woman told him that she hadn't seen either of them.

When Skirata went back to the hangar he popped into *Concord Night*. All the clones jostling around inside, right down to Spar and Sull, stopped what they were doing and greeted him with a cautious reverence.

He didn't need to be treated with child gloves, even if he did look messed up in the face. They'd all lost something and they all hurt. He grabbed Ordo by the arm and pulled him aside.

"*Ad'ika*, have you seen Ny or Ruu?" he asked.

"Sorry, *buir*, I haven't"

Jaing appeared suddenly beside him. "They were both in *Cornucopia*. Probably still are."

It was as good a place as any for them to be. He thanked his boys and went over to the Corellian freighter, which seemed small and homely after the sudden addition of Bralor's pretty black beast, not that Ny was the jealous type.

He climbed up the ramp and into the cargo hold. The cabin was empty but he heard noise from the cockpit, and walked in to see Ny and Ruu both doing systems checks. Conversation passed between them in short remarks, easily understood, and he was glad to find them getting on so well.

They were so busy they didn't notice him, so he cleared his throat and said, "Going somewhere?"

Ruu's head jerked up so fast she knocked it against a console. She swore- still in Basic, not in *Mando'a*- and said, "What is it, *buir*?"

"Just checking in on you two." He shifted his gaze to Ny. "It's good you're getting stuff prepped. We don't have much time."

"I know," Ny said. "We'll be ready."

There was a wariness in her eyes. She might have forgiven his violent outburst in the kitchen but she certainly hadn't forgotten. For a while she'd been able to kid herself about what kind of man Skirata was, to ignore

the volatile parts of him, but she wasn't going to make that mistake again. He wondered whether he'd lost her for good, lost *both* of them for good.

He had to push those thoughts from his mind. He couldn't deal with emotional problems right now.

"Laseema's going to be in no shape for fighting. I don't want Besany getting mixed up in this either and, well, you know *Kad'ika*'s going to need looking after. Since Altis is gonna be taking this ship into action, I want you to put them all on *Cornucopia* and fly her clear of all this *osik*. Tell me your location once you pick one. We'll find you if we make it through."

Ny and Ruu responded with a long, awkward silence, and Skirata thought, *I really have lost them*.

"Listen," he snapped, "We can't take them along in Bralor's ship. I'd say take *Aay'han*- she's tougher- but I know not to take you from your boat."

"Kal," Ny said, "We're going to Bavinyar."

Skirata froze. He knew what she thought she was doing: saving lives from the evil Empire. He saw the determination on her face, knew he wouldn't sway her, and knew he had to try anyway.

"Listen, this *di'kutla* plan barely has a chance to succeed. There's no way Syne's going to break that blockade. You need to get clear of all this. You need to get *Kad'ika* clear."

"*Buir*, I've already talked to Margolis. You know, the pretty blonde? She says they're putting all the Jedi children on the other freighter, *Ince*, and taking it someplace safe. She's agreed to look after Venku, and anybody else who wants to sit out the fight."

The idea of leaving Darman's son in the hands of Jedi repulsed him, and for totally different reasons than they would have a month ago. "You can't do that! Somebody needs to watch over him, someone *family*."

"Laseema will go with them. Besany's talking about flying *Aay'han* with the rescue operation."

Skirata didn't know whether to laugh or shout or smack sense into both of them. “Besany's no pilot. She's-”

“She doesn't want to run and hide, Kal, not when she can help,” Ny said.

“Help *who*?” He was close to shouting and couldn't stop himself. “It's just one ship, one *little* ship!”

“That can still save someone. They're going to need all the ships they can get.”

“No, no, no.” Skirata's head wagged back and forth.” You can't do this. You're getting yourself killed for *nothing*.”

“*Buir* it's Ny's ship,” Ruu said. “She can do with it what she wants.”

Skirata saw the stubbornness on her face and his heart tumbled further. He was losing them, losing *both* of them. Even if they survived their idiot mission they'd never want to be part of his family again.

“Ruu,” Ny said, “Can I talk to your father alone? Please?”

Ruusaan nodded wordlessly and slipped out of the cockpit. Skirata stared at the co-pilot's seat for a long moment before letting his body fall limp onto its cracked cushions. He stared out the viewport, at the busy flight deck, and couldn't bring himself to look at Ny.

“Listen, Shorty,” she said softly, “I know you've lost too many people today. I can say I'm sorry, or that I understand, but I know it won't be enough. Now you've got something you need to do, and so do I.”

“You're going,” he croaked. “Just say it.”

“We're going to try and get people off Bavinyar, you're right. There's people getting slaughtered there, right now, women and children, just because some Imp admiral wants more pips on his collar. It's not right. You know it isn't. That's why we have to do something.”

“*Shab* all the crying kids. They're not worth any more of my boys.”

There was a pause before she said, “I should have guessed you'd see it that way.”

"I can't lose more. I *can't*. I've already lost another- Niner or Dar, I don't even *know*. *Kad'ika*'s *buir* could be dead already. He needs *some* family left."

"I know. But the galaxy's full of families."

"Let 'em burn."

She didn't say anything. She was probably staring in horror at this ugly little man, stunned that anyone could be so cruel, horrified that she'd been stupid enough to feel any kind of affection for a man as brutal and selfish as Kal Skirata.

"Do what you want to," he muttered. "Just try not to get killed."

"Promise me the same, Shorty."

He didn't look at her; he didn't want to see to disgust on her face. He pushed himself out of the chair and spun for the exit. He walked out into the hold and his daughter was there, standing at the edge of the landing ramp like she was trying to block his path, though when he got close she sidestepped away.

"*Buir*," she said quietly, but nothing more.

He stopped, one foot on the ramp's slope, and looked at her. She'd stumbled into his life the same time as Ny. He hadn't asked for their intrusions, hadn't even *wanted* them. Keeping his clone sons safe was impossible enough a task.

Now they were leaving again, leaving because they'd realized what he really was, and it was almost losing Atin and the Nulls all over again.

He couldn't look at Ruusaan. He told her, "Take care of Ny," and walked down the ramp.

He went straight across the flight deck toward *Concord Night* with long fast strides. The only way to keep ahead of grief was to keep moving. As he stepped into the big ship's shadow Walon Vau's black form sidled along his.

"Hey, Kal, you okay?" he called.

"Let's get our sons back," Skirata sniffed. "Then let's hurt some Imps."

“Sounds like a full day to me,” Vau agreed, and together they walked into the ship.

Ovolot Qail Uthan looked profoundly unnatural as she stood in the middle of her makeshift laboratory, surrounded by exotic many-colored alien plants grown by Jedi gardeners, affixing a black plasteel breastplate over her white medical jacket. She'd wrapped a utility belt around her waist, too, and the butt of a small hold-out blaster protruded from its holster.

Scout, dressed in the same white vest but no armor, sat on her stool and watched. The past few hours had, just a little, felt like their time at Kyrimorut, when she'd helped the doctor and Mij Gilamar cook up a treatment for the clones and an antigen to the deadly F36 virus that Uthan herself had concocted to kill clone soldiers. The setting was different- they worked in a botanist's lab, not a wooden shed- and so was much of the equipment, but it was close enough to bring back bittersweet memories from just a week before.

But a week could be a long time, and Scout knew there was no going back. This was just an echo, soon to end.

She probably wouldn't see Uthan again.

The woman fixed the straps on her breastplate, glanced in the mirror, adjusted her short black hair, then finally turned to look at Scout.

“Thank you,” she said. “For all you've done.”

“Are you sure this is going to work?”

“Of course not. We don't have time to test it and couldn't if we did.”

“But it *should* work, in theory.”

“In theory, the rhinacyria virus we modified should target anyone who hasn't already been infected with the F36 antigen, and everyone on this ship has. I've also fixed up a simple injection for anyone on the destroyer who needs fast immunity. It was all simple, so it *should* work.”

“But it won't kill them.”

"Rhinacyria isn't fatal, but it does give humans a massive headache, usually mixed with vomiting and diarrhea."

Scout made a face. "That's a fun thing to give your enemies."

"Better a smelly mess than having to fight a ship full of healthy soldiers. The thing I *don't* know, the thing this *really* hinges on, is whether or not it will act fast enough. Normally rhinacyria has to incubate for at least six hours, usually closer to a day before people get hit by symptoms. I've tried to speed that up, but I can't know for sure if I can't test it."

"At least it'll be easy to spread. Just hook it into the ship's atmospheric system and let it go."

"It's better than trying to spread it on a planet, yes, but that ship is a full kilometer long. It'll still take time, and we don't have that. I wish we could have produced more copies of the virus."

"We're lucky Ustu helped us speed up the cultures."

"Yes, Force-induced cell reproduction. What will you people think of next?"

Scout eyed her black armor. "Do you really have to deliver it personally?"

"It's my creation. I'm the only one who knows how it works and can make adjustments if we have to."

"You're brave," Scout was honestly impressed.

Uthan shrugged like it was nothing. "We only have one chance to do it right. Besides, I've got a couple-dozen commandos to protect me."

"I'd feel better if Mij were here," Scout said softly.

As soon as it came out she knew it had been the wrong things to say. Uthan was still hobbled by grief, just like everybody else, and like Skirata's boys in particular, she'd found escape through hard work. In the short hours they'd spent in *Chu'unthor*'s botany lab, Uthan had seemed to be visibly enjoying the process of modifying the rhinacyria virus, even as she cursed the Jedi's strange equipment. One name, stupidly uttered, had been enough to bring her down.

"At this way, I get a little revenge on the Empire," Scout offered weakly.

"Your kind doesn't believe in revenge."

"No. But you do." It was a statement of understanding, and a mark of how separate they really were.

"This isn't the revenge I had in mind," Uthan admitted. "But it'll do. Besides, wiping out everybody on Coruscant isn't my style. Even I have a conscience."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Scout said it earnestly, but Uthan started laughing. It was dry laughter and it ended quickly. "You should be worrying about yourself, you know. Altis is diving headlong into the fire."

"So are you."

"Like I said, I have protection. You're going to be on a big clunky ship trying to break through a blockade."

There wasn't much Scout could argue with. She swallowed and said, "I'm not going to run away."

"I didn't think you would. You're too... *Jedi* for that."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"You can take it as you like," Uthan shrugged. She turned back in the mirror and adjusted the straps on her vest.

Scout asked, "What do you think Mij would say if he were here now?"

"He'd probably be out there doing head-butts with his *Mando* buddies."

"I'm serious," Scout frowned.

Uthan closed her eyes on her own reflection. "If Mij were here he might tell me what mistakes I made. Then I'd be a lot more confident going I jump into a big pile of *osik*."

It was the kind of practical answer Scout should have expected. Uthan was never going to spill her deepest grief, not for Scout, not for anyone else. Scout was probably a lot less practical, but she was willing to live with that.

She hopped off the stool and stood in front of Uthan with her hand held out. When the woman opened her eyes, looked down, and saw it, a little smile tilted her mouth.

"Take care of yourself, Doctor," Scout said.

The woman reached out and shook.

As Scout pulled her hand away, the door to the lab slid open and Walon Vau's black helmet popped through the threshold.

"You don't need your *buy'c,*" Uthan planted her hands on her hips. "It's safe here."

"Good to know," Vau said, but he didn't take it off. He stabbed a thumb over his shoulder and said, "Seal that thing up and get your *shebs* over to the hangar. We're ready to go."

Scout stiffened, and she heard Uthan take a deep breath.

"Okay," she said, "Time for a little revenge."

24

"Sometimes, Kad'ika*, you have no idea what's going to happen. It doesn't matter if you have six hours to put a plan together or six years, because when the fighting starts, most plans go straight to* osik*. You just have to dive headlong into the mess and try to make the most of it. What saves your life in those situations isn't planning, preparation, or even a well-prepped kit. It's the brothers at your side."*

As he stood on *Majesty*'s bridge, Octavian Grant felt a rare stab of envy for starship captains like Pellaeon or Griff. The blue globe of Bavinyar sprawled out beneath him, and all it took was one gesture to rain destruction down the helpless planet. It was so *easy*, and so satisfying to see the fireballs light like tiny candles so far below.

The sensation of supremacy was thrilling, but Grant didn't let himself indulge in it, not yet.

It had been almost seven hours since the siege began. After the initial volley targeting Bavinyar's second-largest settlement, he'd restricted attacks to smaller islands with populations of under fifty thousand. There were still some seventy populated islands left to ravage and he wanted to take his time building up to a grand crescendo. If he destroyed the planet's largest settlement at Cepahlia, with some three hundred thousand souls, he'd remove any incentive for Jereveth Syne to surrender, and that was, after all, the real point of this bloody exercise.

He was mildly surprised the woman hadn't tried to contact him. He didn't know how far Syne was from Bavinyar, but if she wanted to end the bloodshed quickly she would have commed her surrender after the first bombardment.

The fact that she'd sent no message at all meant she was either en route or still planning a desperate scheme to liberate her people. Grant was not impatient- and the view from *Majesty*'s bridge *was* stunning- but after seven hours he was getting curious as to what Syne's bold move would to be. If she simply dropped her flagship into the interdiction field with an offer to surrender, he'd be both disappointed and suspicious.

He pulled himself away from the forward viewpoint and stalked across the bridge to Captain Griff. The young man was speaking quietly with one Captain Melusar, the commander for the 501st company that had been detached to help hunt down the Jedi from Belsavis.

Grant had already read the intel briefing on Melusar. The man's hate for Jedi went well beyond the typical distaste men like Grant felt. Given the Emperor's apparent desire to create his own cadre of loyal Force-users, it was a little surprising that Melusar hadn't yet mysteriously disappeared like his predecessor Sa Cuis.

Right now the thin, pale man looked visibly impatient that he hadn't gotten a chance to kill any Jedi yet. As Grant approached he said, "Admiral, do we have any news about the Jedi working with Jereveth Syne?"

"I was about to ask the same question." He shifted his attention to Griff.

"No, sir," the captain said. "No reports of Syne at all."

"Are you certain she'll come?" asked Melusar.

"We've laid the perfect trap for her. She'll come."

Griff glanced at his chronometer. "Admiral, I believe we are due for another volley in a few minutes."

"You're quite right, Captain. This time I believe I will give *you* the liberty to chose the target."

"Me, sir?"

"Barring the main city on Cephalia. I'm saving that one for last."

"Of course, sir. If you'll give me a moment to review the charts, sir, I'll be happy to select a target."

"Please do."

He watched the young man stalk off the tactical station. Griff was a man of good breeding and good taste. If he showed himself to have a bit of tactical sense, he might make a fine admiral someday.

Grant doubted the same could be said for Melusar. The man had an admittedly admirable track record in hunting Force-users, but Grant knew his zeal would become a liability once the last Jedi were exterminated. The thing that made him valuable to the Empire would inevitably make him a liability too.

He doubted if Melusar could appreciate that irony.

"I'm sorry that my men couldn't get to Bavinyar fast enough to apprehend the Jedi, sir," Melusar said earnestly.

"Your men left as quickly as they could. There's no reason to apologize."

He hadn't yet asked Melusar where he'd gotten the location of the Jedi safehouse at Belsavis. The man was honest but not a fool, and he probably wouldn't appreciate someone trying to sniff out his intel sources.

"When do you expect *Valediction* to reach the Bavinyar system, sir?"

"She's set to arrive soon, though she'll have to crawl halfway through the system on sublight. I can't lower the interdiction field even for a friendly ship."

"I understand, sir. I just want to keep track of my men."

Grant was in no hurry for Pellaeon's ship to arrive. Between Zaarin and Darys he didn't know who he wanted to see less. Ohran Keldor's disgrace and subsequent flight was the one satisfying thing to come out of the whole Belsavis debacle.

Griff promptly reappeared at Grant's side and snapped a salute. “Admiral, I believe I have selected a target. The island of Maressa, population thirty-five thousand.”

“An island immediately south of Cephalia.”

“That's correct, sir.”

“Then we should strike fear in the hearts at the capital. A wise choice.”

To his credit, Griff didn't smile or flush. “Shall I ready to attack, sir?”

“Please do.”

Griff marched off again. Grant ignored Melusar and turned his attention to the planet outside the forward viewport. The sphere's beautiful blue was pocked in places by spacecraft that hung in lower orbit or even within the atmosphere. More and more of them were appearing, all of them packed with refugees from islands attacked or yet to be bombarded, but none of them had dared try and break through the siege net.

Like Grant himself, they were probably waiting for Syne to play her hand.

“Admiral,” said Griff, “We have a targeting solution.”

“Very good, Captain. Prepare to-”

“Sirs!” announced the communications lieutenant, “*Valediction* has just dropped out of hyperspace.”

“There you have it, Captain,” Grant nodded at Melusar. “Captain Griff, you may fire when-”

“Sirs,” the lieutenant interjected, “*Valediction* says she is launching a shuttle. Commodore Zaarin is aboard, as well as one Jedi prisoner.”

Grant held back a scowl. “I'm glad to see he's eager to return to us. What about Miss Darys?”

“She's remaining on *Valediction*. They say she's conducting an interrogation of the Jedi Master.”

It was almost enough to lift Grant's mood. “Very well. Prepare a small welcoming party for Zaarin, emphasis on *small*. Captain Griff?”

“Yes, Admiral?”

"You may fire when ready."

"Excellent, sir."

Grant put everything else out of his head and watched bright green lances strike out toward the planet. They dwindled to nothing, then flashed bright destruction on the planet' surface. More turbolaser blasts followed, claiming the rest of the island's thirty-five thousand lives.

He felt better already.

Scorch felt like he had the weight of the whole *shabla* galaxy wrapped around his head. As he, Boss, and Fixer stood in the narrow maintenance corridor outside the emergency airlock, none of them dared speak. The occasional clank of machinery or hiss of pressure valves were like thunder-crashes in the silence. He waited for Vau or Jaing to whisper in his ear and tell him that they'd arrived. The internal chrono on his helmet- no, not his, *Niner's*- ticked away in the corner of his heads-up display, and by his count the Mandalorians should have docked one minute and thirty seconds ago.

Soru had peeked into *Valediction*'s navigational software and plucked out the exact time and place where the destroyer was set to exit hyperspace. Scorch had passed that information along to Vau. Vau and the other Mandos were, presumably, waiting just outside the re-entry point in Rav Bralor's stealth ship for *Valediction* to arrive.

As a minute-thirty became two full minutes, Scorch started to worry that they'd gotten the exit coordinates off. It would be tragic and a little ridiculous if they'd gone through all this trouble just for *Concord Night* to get splattered over *Valediction*'s shields like a flitgnat on a windscreen.

At two-minutes-thirty, someone said, "You there, *ner vod*?"

Scorch's knees buckled. "Jaing?"

"Even better, it's Mereel. You got your *vode* there?"

"Fixer and Boss are with me. We're at the airlock."

"We're right under you. I noticed nobody's started shooting at us yet."

"Good to know." Scorch peered out through the airlock's small transparisteel porthole, but all he saw were stars. "Everything else according to plan?"

"Mostly. The Imps launched some shuttle right when they dropped into realspace. We had to drop back to make sure they didn't spot us."

Scorch had no idea who was on the shuttle, which was worrying in itself, but there was nothing to be done now. He said, "We have two others guys man jamming up their outbound comm systems. Let's get this done before somebody notices they're being sabotaged."

"You trust them?"

"I do. Are you ready to dock?"

"Stand by."

Scorch kept peering out the viewport until he saw a black shape eclipse the stars. He stepped back and flicked on his headset's external speaker. "They're here."

Boss and Fixer nodded wordlessly. They still weren't sure whether their helmets were bugged, so they weren't taking any chances with direct bucket-to-bucket connections.

Three more pressure valves popped like gunshots in the narrow corridor, and Scorch almost jumped. The airlock clanked and groaned until Scorch was sure they were going to set off some alarms somewhere and get a full column of white soldiers charging at them, but nobody came.

A light glowed on the other side of the airlock. Scorch and Fixer unlocked the portal and swung the heavy door open.

The first thing to pop through the gap was the ugly six-legged beast Scorch had never thought he'd be glad to see. As Lord Mirdalan slunk around his legs, Walon Vau appeared in front of them, covered head-to-toe in sinister black *beskar'gam*. Over his shoulders, Scorch saw a corridor packed with T-visor Mandalorian helmets and

more men with bare faces and missmatched red and brown body armor.

"Off with the *buy'ce*," Vau said, "And give us some room."

The Deltas backed away from the airlock to let more than twenty bodies into the narrow corridor. Vau and Skirata, in his battered gold armor, backed the trio toward the entrance as all three of them removed their helmets.

"*Shab*, it's good to see you lads," Vau said, almost warmly.

"Where's my boy?" Skirata asked. "He still in the brig?"

"As far as we know," Boss reported. "We can get there in ten minutes, best time, but I don't know how-"

"We're not going there yet." A clone in red and gray armor appeared between Vau and Skirata. "We've got to take care of you boys first."

"Is that you, Fi?" asked Fixer. "Heard you got were brain-dead or paralyzed or something."

"Good as new. Mostly, anyway." Fi tapped his burgundy chestplate. "I wasn't going to sit this one out."

They knew from Niner that Fi hadn't been killed in action, like the official reports said, but it was weird seeing him again, now of all times. Scorch wished Sev were there instead, back from the dead, but Fi would do.

"No time for reunion," Skirata said. "Where's Uthan?"

"Right here." A thin woman with short black hair and black strap-on body-armor slipped between the Mandos.

"You the woman who brewed up a virus to kill us all?" Scorch asked.

"The very same." She said dryly.

"She's also the one who's gonna save your *shebs*," Fi said. "She figured out how to slow our aging, and-"

"And disable this ship's crew, barring yourselves." She took a small syringe out of her breast pocket.

"She's a *shabla* wizard, boys. Can't wait my turn." another *Mando* said from behind her. Scorch recognized his accent as belonging to one of the defective clones, Spar.

“Needs to go right into the bloodstream, boys, c'mon,” Vau snapped his fingers. “Necks out.”

The Deltas all tilted their heads back and let Uthan inject her fast-action vaccine into the veins in their necks. Scorch wasn't pleased getting stuck with needles by strange women, especially *this* woman, but Vau and Skirata seemed to trust her implicitly, which was all he really needed.

“Okay, step one's done,” Uthan said as she pocketed the syringe. “Now we need to get to climate control center.”

“It’s not far from here, say, seven minutes if no interruption.” Boss said. “Do we split up or stay together?”

“We should start heading for the cell block ASAP,” Fi said. He wanted to free Niner or Darman, whoever was in there.

“Neg that, we don’t want to rush in too fast,” Vau said. “Doctor, you're with me. We'll grab Yayax too. Let's make some Imps puke their guts out.”

“That's what I'm here for,” she said seriously.

He looked at the Deltas. “You boys know the insides of this ship?”

They nodded. Vau said, “Boss, Scorch, you're with me too. Kal, take Fixer and your boys and head for the cell block, but stay low and don't engage until we start making 'em sick.”

“What about security cameras?” Fixer asked. “I couldn't kill all of them without tripping alarms.”

“That's what we're here for,” said a Mandalorian with a lightsaber dangling from his belt.

“You look good, *Bard'ika*,” Scorch said. “You can use your Force powers to scramble the cameras?”

“We both can.” A large man appeared suddenly beside Jusik. He was dressed in a dark brown tunic and held a lightsaber in each hand. The darkness in his eyes and tattoo-marks on his face made him look angry and determined and not like any of the Jedi Scorch had ever seen.

“Did you determine the identity of the prisoners?” the Jedi fixed those dark eyes on Scorch.

“I tried. They say they've got a Jedi Master, a Ho'din.”

“Master Plett.”

“Also one of my *vode*, and a Jedi kid, and a woman. A dark-skinned woman.”

The man nodded. “I know her.”

“I'll come with you to the cell block.” Jusik said. “You go with Vau and the Deltas, Master Hett. Take your commando team, too. We'll need you to secure the bridge once you poison the air.”

Hett looked reluctant, but nodded. Scorch guessed he'd be pretty good in a fight.

“All right,” Boss looked at the Fixer. “Stay safe. I want to be annoyed by you for fifty more years, understand?”

“I'll try, Sarge,” Fixer smirked.

“Okay, enough chit-chat.” Vau clapped his hands together. “Let's take this ship and go home.”

There was no time to give Fixer the goodbye he deserved, or to play any sort of catch-up with Fi or Corr or the Nulls. Boss took the lead, with Scorch behind him, as they worked their way through a series of maintenance corridors. Scorch put Niner's *buy'c* back on his head and had it patched into the frequency Vau and the other *Mandos* were using. Boss's helmet was still untrustworthy, so he ditched it by the airlock and went bravely bare-faced. Vau followed with Lord Mird running all six legs to keep beside him. Rav Bralor's Yayax Squad formed a guard around Uthan, while Spar and the fierce-looking Jedi Master brought up the rear with his squadron of commandos from Syne's ship.

When you were boarding a hostile ship, lift tubes were a cage waiting to snare you, so they avoided them entirely. Boss led them to a tall shaft that cut up toward the command tower, and they climbed the rungs one-by-one. Lord Mird somehow managed to cling to Vau's back with

all six claws, and the old *Mando* hauled his strill up without a groan of protest.

It was a long climb, and even Scorch's arms were getting sore when they crawled out into the maintenance corridor. At the far end of the passage was a cluster of tubes spreading out from a central pillar four meters in diameter.

"Is that central climate control?" Uthan asked between deep breaths.

"That's right," Boss said. "You okay, Doc? Got your poison?"

The woman slid her pack off her back and pulled out a cannister as thick as her arm. "I can plug these in. They should start dispersing through the air in thirty seconds."

"How fast will it act?" asked Scorch.

"Only one way to find out," she said. "Let's go."

Boss, Scorch, Vau, and Mird took the lead. They stalked down the hall, rifles up, but both levels of the large chamber were empty. Yayax Squad spread out to cover all the exits while Uthan gave the machinery a quick look-over. She nodded to herself and found a node into which she placed the cannister. After that she pulled two more cannisters from her pack and attached them to the processor as well.

"Are we good?" Vau asked. "Is that it?"

"The virus is circulating through the ship's atmosphere now," Uthan nodded.

"And anybody who's received immunity to the F36 will be fine?" Rav Bralor asked.

"That's the plan. Like I said, I never got a chance to test any of this."

"What's F36?" Scorch asked.

"The virus I was going to use on you," Uthan said grimly. "Instead Palps used a mod of it to poison Gibadan. I developed a vaccine for it and tried to spread it around. Kal's people, Altis', they're all immune. I just hope it didn't spread *too* far, otherwise this will all be for nothing."

"Well, if this doesn't work we'll just have to do it the old-fashioned way," Spar said. "And what the hell, we can probably pull it off. A couple dozen clones, some *aruetisse* commandos, and oh yeah, a Jedi or two."

Before Hett could respond, the blast doors in the upper level of the chamber opened and swarm of white-armored clone soldiers burst out. The nearest Yayax man, Jind, caught a chest full of blasterfire and tumbled off the walkway. The chamber suddenly filled with plasma and smoke and everyone around the climate machinery scrambled for cover.

"Behind the core! Behind it!" Bralor shouted.

Scorch threw himself behind the machinery, right next to Uthan, who clutched her bag against her chest and kept her bare head low.

"Best place for cover," he told her.

"They blow this up, we'll *all* suffocate," Spar added.

Sure enough, the Imps didn't dare shoot at it, but they weren't shy about filling the rest of the chamber with blasterfire. Most of the group managed to take cover together, but Boss was pinned down behind a console and the Yayax sergeant, Cov, got stuck directly beneath the elevated platform from which the enemy fired. Jind lay flat on the ground, unmoving, almost certainly dead, and one of Syne's commandos took a shot to the back and fell.

"Did you call Kal?" Bralor asked Vau over their head-sets.

"I'll do it now."

Scorch looked to the Jedi. "Can you take them?"

Two green lightsaber blazed in either hand, but he looked at them like he wasn't sure how to use them. "Some of them. Not all."

"Well, there's more coming. We need to move fast!"

"No!" Uthan interjected. "Someone has to guard the machine for at least fifteen more minutes. Otherwise the Imps can tear out the capsules before the virus spreads far enough."

A blaster nearly winged Scorch's helmet. “Well, we might be stuck here for at least fifteen minutes.”

Suddenly more blasterfire filled the room. The hail falling on the lower level suddenly dissipated, and Scorch looked up to see lasers criss-crossing over their heads.

Before he understood, Hett leaped into motion. The Jedi was a big man but he seemed to fly effortlessly onto the top level. His two emerald blades whipped like fans around his head as he cut his way through a group of clone soldiers. Armor-cased heads and limbs, severed from smoking bodies, tumbled to the lower deck to join the corpses already there.

It was over as fast as it had started. Somebody above, a clone, shouted “Clear!” and Scorch popped out from behind his cover.

The only ones standing on the top platforms were the Jedi and five clone soldiers in black 501st armor.

“Hey!” Joc shouted down at them. “Thought you could use a hand!”

Scorch laughed. “We could use ten!”

“You got it,” said Soru. Brant, Olin, and even Kol stood behind him, nodding.

“Friendlies?” Bralor asked him.

“Looks like,” Scorch said. He didn't know how Soru had turned his whole squad and didn't really care. Even with the ship’s crew coming down sick they’d still need all the manpower they could muster to fight their way to the bridge,

Uthan appeared, still clutching her bag against her chest, and pointed up at Joc and Sixers. “You five! Get down here! Now!”

“Think we oughta listen to the nice lady?” asked Olin.

“This ship is being pumped full of a modified quick-action rhinacyria virus. Unless you want to be puking in your helmets, come down here and get a vaccine.”

“Just like a little prick, *vode,*” Boss said as he came out from behind the console.

As Joc and the Sixers clambered down, Vau grabbed Bralor by the arm and said, “We still need to take the command deck. Can you stay here with your boys and guard the climate control system?”

She glanced at Jind's body. “You've got it.”

“Good. Doc, you did great. Stick the new kids then plant your *shebs* here.”

Uthan prepared her syringe. “I'm not up for storming any command towers right now. Have fun, though.”

“Trust me, I will.”

“Did you call Skirata?” Scorch asked.

“I gave him the go.” Vau scratched Mird's head as it rubbed against his leg. “Rescuing your last *vod* is up to him now. We've got to jack this ship before it reaches Bavinyar.”

“Well, at least we've done the hard part,” Soru said as he took off his helmet. Uthan was already sticking Joc. “Or was this the easy part?”

“Only one way to find out,” Scorch glanced at Jind's body again. He was pretty sure the *easy part* was far, far away.

Gilad Pellaeon was stuck in a timeless nothing, staring down at the dark face and gently closed eyes beneath him, when his comlink started buzzing yet again.

Without opening her eyes or taking her head off the bed's brittle pillow, Hallena said, “You should really get that.”

Pellaeon fumbled for his uniform jacket. He pulled it over his shoulder and flicked the comlink on.

“This is the captain,” he said, “Report.”

“Gil, where have you been?” Vernedet squawked.

“Mynar, what's wrong? Have we reached the Bavinyar system?”

“Gil, we've been boarded! Someone's jamming our comms and we can't call for help!”

Hallena jerked upright. “Boarded?”

"Boarded by who?" Pellaeon held the comlink with one hand while he fumbled into his trousers and boots. "What's going on?"

"I can't tell, sir. Sir, there seems to be two groups. One group, I think we lost track of-"

"You *what?*"

"Sir, we think the other one's heading for the brig. I'm getting reports, but they sound impossible."

"What are they?"

"Some say Jedi, some say Mandalorians, some say Five-oh-First troops. It makes no sense."

It didn't; nothing made sense. It might have if Pellaeon was on the bridge, looking over his men like he should have been, but he'd been lying in bed with a woman, a prisoner, a traitor to the Empire instead of doing watching out for the men under his command.

"I'm on my way," he flicked off the comlink.

Hallena, still seated on the bed, was throwing on her own jacket. "Gil, what's happening? I heard Jedi, and Mandos."

"Friends of yours?"

She opened her mouth but didn't speak. She couldn't hide the sudden hope in her eyes. He grabbed her by the wrist and jerked her out of bed.

"Gil, what is it-"

"They're coming *here*. You're coming with me."

"Gil, wait-"

Maybe he was trying to protect her or maybe he couldn't bear to have her pulled from his life again, but either way he grabbed his pistol in one hand and used the other to drag her out into the corridor.

"This ship has been boarded!" He told the white-armored clones in the hallway. "Enemy troops are heading this way. You're to secure the remaining prisoner and evacuate the hall at once. Is that understood?"

The clones stared at him but didn't respond. Something in their postures seemed slack; the one with sergeant's stripes seemed to sway on his feet.

"Is that *understood*?" he repeated.

"Yes, sir!" the sergeant's head jerked up. His voice still sounded weak.

Blasterfire sounded at one end of the hall. Two clones turned and moved sluggishly toward the noise; another leaned against the wall and seemed ready to collapse.

Pellaeon's whole world had been turned upside-down for the second or third time in a day. Instinct took over. He pulled Hallena down the hall, away from the laserfire, the interposed himself between her and the far end. Red bolts whipped down the corridor from behind them. Pellaeon pounded the controls to summon the lift as his other hand gripped Hallena's thin wrist like a vise.

"Gil, wait," she pleaded. "You can't. Those people-"

"They're taking my ship!" he snapped, and when the lift doors open he hurled Hallena through, and himself after her.

The doors hissed shut. He jammed the button for the command deck. The lift surged to motion and only then did he notice the black-armored stormtrooper standing across from him.

Vernedet's message rang in his head. He raised his service pistol in both hands but before he could shoot and trooper held up both hands in surrender.

"Stand down, Captain, please!" he said. "I'm here to protect you!"

Pellaeon didn't lower the gun. "What's going on? What's the Five-oh-First doing?"

"I don't know, sir, but I swear that I'm loyal." The trooper slowly lowered his hands. "Lieutenant Vernedet sent me to protect you. I'm TK-seven-zero-five-eight-eight, but please, call me Rede."

Niner was lost in a void.

From the moment when he'd pulled the trigger on Darman, everything had become a timeless nothing. Rede had shot him, and sometime later he'd come to his senses

on a bed in *Valediction*'s brig, stripped of his armor and weapons, staring at a blank gray ceiling, wondering why he wasn't dead.

It would have been better that way; easier, certainly. It was what he deserved. He was the sergeant, and he'd failed Darman, and Darman had failed his brothers and gotten them killed. It was a long chain of tragedies and they'd all started with Niner, because he wasn't the sergeant he should have been, the one *Kal'buir* had trained him to be.

He should have hanged himself like Ko Sai, but his captors, in their wisdom, hadn't left him with anything to do it with. So instead he lay there, staring at the ceiling. After a while he stopped feeling anything, even regret.

When blasterfire started to ricochet down the corridor outside, he barely noticed. The tang of lasers on plasma-resistant durasteel was familiar, though, and after a minute he recognized them for what they were.

He still didn't sit up. That only happened when a pack of plastic explosives blew through the lock of his cell and swung the door open.

Smoke poured into the room. Niner stared at it from his bed but didn't stand. A figure stepped through the threshold, a Mandalorian in gray and dark red armor that reminded him of Ghez Hokan, the Sep mercenary the Omegas had been sent to kill on their very first mission.

"Niner, it's you!" the Mando staggered forward.

Another man stumbled in behind him wearing black 501st armor. The one in gray and red dragged Niner up by the shoulders and wrapped armored arms around him.

"Oh, *shab* Niner, it's me, Fi."

He hadn't seen Fi in almost two years. For a second it felt like he'd exchanged one brother for another.

"We're so sorry about Darman," said another Mando in the doorway. Niner's eyes went to the stump of his right hand; Corr?

"What happened to Rede?" the commando in black said. From his voice, it was probably Fixer.

“I don't know.” Niner muttered as Fi released him.

“We'll slot him for what he did to Darman, I guarantee it,” Fi said. “Are you good to move, *Ner'ika*?”

“I.... I think so.” Niner blinked. He still felt like he was stuck in the void. Nothing was real. “Is *Kal'buir*...”

“Am I what, son?” A Mandalorian in gold armor appeared behind Corr.

“Oh, *buir.”* Niner's legs went weak but Fi and Fixer braced him.

Skirata took off his helmet so Niner could see him face-to-face. His *buir* looked the same at first glance: the same weathered face, thin lips, and high cheekbones. Then he saw the pain of loss in his eyes and the bittersweet joy of reunion. He knew he had more pain to give.

“I'm so glad you're okay, son.” Skirata kissed his fingertips and placed them on Niner's lips, stopping him from speaking. There was so much he needed and dreaded to say he felt like it would all spill out the moment *Kal'buir* too his hand away.

Then another Mando in gray armor appeared in the hallway. “We've checked the other cells. No signs of the Jedi Master.”

“*Shab*. Thanks, Levet,” Skirata took his hand away and said, “We're not just here for you, son. We've got to secure the other prisoners.”

“I'm pretty sure we saw the woman get hauled up in the lift,” Corr said. “Nobody else is on this cell block, though. No kid, no Ho'din.”

“Where's *Bard'ika*?” asked Skirata. “See if his Jedi sonar's working.”

“I'm right here, *buir*,” a voice said, and another Mando appeared beside Levet. He wore gray and blue armor and he had a lightsaber dangling from his belt. He stared at Niner through his T-visor helmet for a moment before he said, “It's good to see you, *ner vod*.”

Niner nodded dumbly. Seeing all of them like this, after so much time, after what he'd done, it was all too much.

"Can you feel anything, *Bard'ika*?" asked Fi.

"Something. I think... *Buir*, I think the woman who killed Atin is with Plett."

The room dropped into silence. Niner saw resolve harden on Skirata's face.

"Okay," he said, "*Bard'ika*, you're our guide. We're taking the Nulls and Tay'haai and going after her. Fi, take everyone else and head for the bridge. Vau's gonna need all the help he can get."

"It might be a hard fight to get there." Fi looked at Niner. "Are you up for it?"

"Fighting that Sith witch will be harder," Jusik said. "*Buir* are you sure you want to go after her?"

"Damn right I'm, sure. I owe her some pain." Skirata looked back to Niner and patted him on the shoulder. "Stay tough, *Ner'ika*. We've still got a star destroyer to secure."

Even after everything that had just happened it was too much to believe. "You're... stealing a star destroyer?"

Skirata gave a brittle smile. "You know us, always looking for a challenge. Don't worry about us. We'll be okay."

Niner's father didn't really believe that; he could see it on his face. But Kal Skirata put his gold *buy'c* back on his head, concealing his doubt behind the mask of a warrior.

Niner had no mask and no armor, but Fi handed him a spare Czerka pistol. It felt heavy in his hand. Against himself, he found he wanted to live. He didn't want to leave his brothers again.

My 'Jedi sonar,' as they called it, was never that good, but it was enough to track down Master Plett and his torturer. I was still shocked that she'd survived being stabbed by Corr, but as I let myself slip into the Force I could sense her presence. After the fight that had killed Atin, I could never forget it.

We generally tried to avoid lifts, but the detention block was far away from any maintenance corridors so we

decided to risk a ride up. The tube was just big enough for myself, *Kal'buir*, Wad'e Taay'haai and the three Nulls to squeeze inside. We hadn't encountered any more troops since we took the detention block and I was starting to hope that Uthan's virus was doing its job.

When we arrived on the right deck I could feel we were close. I took point with my saber in front of me. *Kal'buir* and the Nulls followed and Tay'haai covered our rear. We wound down three identical corridors before we found the room where they were holding Plett. Two troopers in black 501st armor were standing watch, but when we showed up they were slow to fire. Stun blasts, unfortunately, don't get through that armor, so we had to go for kill shots. I stood up front and batted their shots back at them with my saber, but I was reluctant to charge in and slice up these poor clones who were only following the orders they'd been bred to obey.

Mereel wasn't that reticent; he dropped one with a well-placed shot to the neck. Ordo was a little gentler; he caught the other one in the hip and sent him falling. The clone curled up in pain and Jaing dashed forward to kick his blaster out of reach, not that he was in the position to go for it.

"Where is she?" Mereel asked me.

"I don't know. My sonar's not that good."

"But she's close."

I nodded.

"On the other side of that door?"

"I don't know." I felt a presence but I thought it was Plett; I didn't know for sure and I found myself hesitating. I was afraid to face that woman again, even if she was wounded.

"Cut it open, *Bard'ika*," *Kal'buir* commanded, and that decided me.

The door to the interrogation room was easy to cut through; it took just three broad arcs with my lightsaber. Lasterfire immediately poured through the gap. It sparked

and pounded into my *beskar* and pushed me back; if I'd been wearing normal body armor it would have killed me. Ordo grabbed me by the arm and pulled me free while the others poured laserfire into the gap. I wanted to tell them to stop, lest they hit Plett, but I'd been pounded so hard in the chest I could barely breathe.

The enemy fire stopped almost as fast as it had started. Mereel and Jaing went through the gap first; I followed with *Kal'buir* and Ordo, who was still limping a little on his shot-up leg. On the floor were two more black 501st clones, smoking and dead. In the far corner, mercifully unhit, a white-haired Ho'din was strapped to an interrogation bed. A kiosk with a lot of nasty-looking medical equipment sat to one side, and when Mereel and Ordo pulled him free of his binds it was clear he was still pretty drugged.

They tried to sit him upright. His black eyes blinked and his lipless mouth struggled to form words.

"Where is she?" *Kal'buir* stalked up to him. "Where's that Sith witch? *Where*?"

"Witch... Darys..." the Ho'din moaned. "She's... just..."

Another lightsaber hissed to life. We spun toward the hall to see a dark woman with a red blade charging at Tay'haai. Ordo and I lurched for the threshold but by the time we got out into the hallway it was already too late. Darys sheared off the mouth of Tay'haai's rifle. He dropped it and reached for his *bes'bev*, the *beskar* flute with one pointy end. He tried to stab her with it but she caught his arm at the wrist and pulled it aside. Her other hand flicked up; red light spun up and neatly severed his head from his body.

Kal'buir screamed murder, and that got her attention.

Ordo was already coming up with his rifle. Darys spun to face us and batted Ordo's shots right at him. One caught him in the shoulder, throwing off his aim, and she charged. She swung at Ordo but he was lucky. His bad leg gave out

and he fell, and her red blade only scraped across the top of his helmet.

I threw myself at her. I matched her blow-for-blow and forced her back toward the doorway. Her dark face was hard as stone but I could tell from her movements she was hurting from Corr's stab wound. Mereel and Jaing fired at her back but she dropped like her whole body'd gone limp, and I barely ducked before their shots took me instead.

Darys spun into the interrogation room. She whipped her red saber up and slashed it across Mereel's chest; sparks rained from his *beskar* and he fell against the wall. She caught Jaing's shot in her free hand and threw him with the Force into *Kal'buir*, knocking them both against the wall.

I was back on her. I tried to angle her into a corner, but even though she was wounded she still came on strong. I felt an invisible hand grip my throat hard and lost my concentration. Suddenly I was flying, and then my head and back snapped against a wall.

Darys fell on me, stilling swinging, but now I was the cornered one. One blow skimmed my shoulder-armor and cut into my collarbone. I screamed in pain and she pulled back for another blow when a rush of Force energy found us both. Master Plett, still lying on his bed, hurled all those nasty torture tools right at her. Syringes and scissor-blades stabbed into her back; she howled and hurled Plett off his bed with the Force, but before she could do anything else I was on her again, pushing her back.

She was hurt but she was mad. Blue lightning sizzled from her fingertips and jolted across the gap between us. Electric pain seared my senses and I could barely block her next attack. I found myself falling back to the corner again, and in a moment I had my back to the wall while Darys seemed to loom above me, grinding her red blade into mine until sparkling blue and red were both just inches from my face.

Then *Kal'buir* appeared behind her, put his rifle-tip to the back of her head, and pulled the trigger.

She collapsed like a doll. Sparks of blue lightning sizzled across her corpse for a few seconds before dying. Her lightsaber fell dead to the floor and rolled next to the blown-open wreckage of her skull.

Despite the pain in my shoulder I took in the scene: *Kal'buir* with his chest heaving in exhaustion, Jaing and Mereel struggling to stand, Master Plett lying in the opposite corner without the ability or inclination to get up. Three dark corpses that would never rise again.

I staggered into the hallway. Ordo was braced against the wall. Taay'hai was still lying there. His head had rolled up against the wall and his body lay chest-down against the floor. I walked over to his *bes'bev* and picked it up.

Kal'buir stood by the door, staring at the corpse, staring at me.

"I'm sorry, *buir*," I said. He'd been through so much loss in the past few days I didn't know he could handle it at all. His fellow *Cuy'val dar* were almost as special to him as his boys.

He rasped, "I'm okay, son. I'm okay," but we both knew *okay* was a long time gone.

25

"We'd done everything we wanted to. We rescued Niner and the Deltas, and a few more defecting clones besides. We'd even saved Altis' friend Plett. We could have bailed right there, but we didn't. We were already in too deep, with Altis and Syne both, so we kept fighting. We would have had to fight to get out, too, except then we'd have had to fight good people who'd trusted us. It was easier, better, cleaner to fight the Imps."

It was amazing how fast one of the Empire's top fighting ships could crumble from the inside. Uthan's modified virus worked fast. As Walon Vau's assault team cut its way up the command tower, the resistance it met was weak and confused. The clone troops who did fight were barely able to shoot straight, and Vau's men, mostly clones themselves, did their best to disable the sick soldiers instead of killing them outright.

A'Sharad Hett was at the fore of the attack, batting back laser blasts with his twin lightsabers and acting as a living shield from Syne's commandos and the mutinous clones. He followed the clones' example and tried to wound his enemy without killing them. His sabers cut through armor easily and he tried to limit himself to stabbing legs or severing hands, but every time he came close enough to see his face reflected in a clone's black visor his memory flashed back to Order 66, when panic and rage had overtaken him and he'd killed without hesitation to keep

from dying himself, and a part of him couldn't believe he was showing these men charity they'd never have shown him.

The Imperials tried to enact security protocols to lock the attackers out of corridors approaching the command deck, but a closed door was nothing against a pair of lightsabers. Hett cut through barrier after barrier until he finally carved a massive, smoking hole through the blast doors protecting *Valediction*'s bridge.

The storming of the command deck was a complete anticlimax. Half the crew were slumped against their consoles, too weak to stand. One of them tried to raise his sidearm but quickly dropped it when Vau's strill charged him with bared teeth. None of the others even tried to bring arms against the boarding crew, but Syne's commandos quickly confiscated their weapons anyway.

One of the 501st clones, Soru, hurried over to the communications station. He forcibly shoved aside the crewman and took his seat. A few of the commandos went to help him kill the communications lockout and send a message to Syne.

"Who's in charge here?" Spar bellowed as he stalked around the crew pit. The Mandalorian trained his rifle on bridge officers as he passed them. "C'mon, we don't have all *shabla* day here."

When none of them volunteered, another 501st, Joc, asked, "Where's the captain? Where's Pellaeon?"

"He's not here!" a lieutenant at the gunnery station said. He was slumped in his chair and looked ready to vomit.

"Where's your XO, Vernedet?" asked Boss.

Nobody answered. Hett stalked over to the gunnery lieutenant. His shadow fell over the sick man and without asking he pressed a hand against the man's face.

Seeing into minds had never been his specialty, not normally, but since his spacewalk over Belsavis he'd found himself hyper-attuned to passing thoughts and feelings. He tried to connect his awareness with the lieutenant's. The

man made a short moaning noise and started breathing fasted. Hett could feel the fear and confusion and panic- he even started to feel sick in his stomach- and then he plucked a solid memory: another lieutenant, the executive officer, shockingly hale compared to his crew, rushed off the bridge for somewhere else.

Hett removed himself from the lieutenant's mind. The officer keeled forward and started retching; strings of vomit fell into his lap.

Hett ignored him and turned to the waiting cluster of black-armored clones and Mandalorians. “The captain and executive officer are both gone.”

“Gone where?” Joc asked.

“I can't tell. I don't think anyone knows.”

“Escape, maybe,” Spar suggested.

“That's not Pellaeon's style,” Joc insisted.

“You never know…”

“Does this thing have an auxiliary command deck? Or a self-destruct?” Vau asked.

The 501st troopers looked at each other. Boss said, “They might try to sabotage the ship. All the power comes from the engines. They could cut them off or blow up the core.”

“Knew this wouldn't be easy,” Vau growled. “Okay, we'll send teams to find 'em. Scorch, call Fixer and see if he can take his team to the engine core.

“Got it, Sarge.”

“What about the comm system?” Hett yelled across the deck to Soru.

“Back to normal. We can transmit directly from the bridge and only from the bridge,” the clone replied.

“Lovely.” Vau punched his palm. “Call Syne. Tell her she's good to go.”

“What about Pellaeon and Vernedet?” asked Boss. “They're still threats.”

“Then we terminate them. Can you get a team there?”

“I'd need to review the ship specs one more time, but I think so.”

"Then do it, fast. There's no time to waste."

"Signal to Syne went through," Soru called. "She's on her way."

Vau turned his black helmet on Hett. "You gonna wait here for het or are you gonna track down the captain?"

"You have the bridge under control. I'll go after the captain."

"Good. Boss, Scorch, take this *jetii* with you. Might come in handy."

"I'm coming too," insisted Joc.

"Sure, the more the merrier," Vau waved a hand.

"Fixer's on his way too," Scorch reported. "They've got Niner with them."

"Good for Niner," Vau looked back to Hett. "You keep my boys safe, you understand? And you keep this *ship* safe. No matter what you have to do."

His hands tightened on his sabers. "I won't hesitate."

"Good." Vau gave him a shove toward the door. "Guess some saber-jocks are useful after all. Now go! *Oya*!"

Gilad Pellaeon didn't have time to think about the enormity of his failure. He didn't have time to think at all.

He still had one hand clamped around Hallena's wrist as he dragged her down the corridors. Rede went ahead of them; he was alert and had his rifle up at all times. They'd somehow become hostiles on their own ship and nothing made sense; he kept his grip tight on Hallena because she seemed the only real thing left in the universe.

She'd stopped protesting and stopped trying to drag him down. When he looked back at her she trudged dutifully, lovelessly, resigned to her fate. It almost made him hurt inside but he was too confused to feel even guilt.

Yet another door slid open and suddenly they were facing Vernedet and a squadron of white-armored clones. Rede lowered his sidearm; Pellaeon did not until Vernedet held up both hands and told him to stop.

Pellaeon lowered the gun. “I'm sorry, Mynar. I'm so sorry, about all of this-”

“It's all right, sir,” Vernedet said, though it clearly wasn't. His eyes fell on Hallena and went dark.

“The cause of all your problems,” she said, dry and unapologetic.

“Gil, we don't have time to drag her around.”

His grip on his wrist got even tighter. “No. We'll talk about this later. For now, she stays.”

“Gil, they've poisoned the ship. Most of the crew has come down sick somehow. I don't know why we haven't.”

“Who's taken over? Jedi? Mandalorians?”

“Apparently both, sir. And some mutineers from the Five-oh-First.”

Pellaeon put a hand on Rede's shoulder. “This man is loyal, don't worry.”

That only slightly soothed Vernedet. “Captain, they have the bridge. I knew we couldn't defend it, not with everyone sick, but I think we can stop *Valediction* before she reaches the blockade.”

Grim knowledge broke through the confusion. “The reactor core.”

“Even if we don't destroy the ship we can cripple her engines.” Vernedet tapped a pair of grenades hooked to his belt. The clone troops all had their share. “Sir, you don't have to come with me. We should get you to an escape pod.”

“Mynar, this is my fault. My... judgment was clouded.” He couldn't bear to look at Hallena, even as his fingernails dug into her arm. “This is my ship. My failure.”

Vernedet wanted to object but didn't. Instead he let his eyes drift back to Hallena. “And what of... your failure, sir?”

He thought a moment, then said, “Rede, please take the prisoner to escape pod V-5 and stand by for further instructions. If we.... if the ship begins to self-destruct, eject both her and yourself.”

"Very good, sir," Rede said.

He stepped behind Hallena and twisted her one arm behind her back. Pellaeon let go of her wrist and listened to her grunt as Rede twisted the other arm too.

Without looking back at her, he said, "Thank you, Rede. You may go now."

He heard footsteps fall down the corridor. He still didn't look back. Instead he kept his eyes on Vernedet's, on their accusation, their sorrow, their grim determination.

Vernedet didn't deserve to die for Pellaeon's mistakes. As soon as they secured the core he'd tell the clones to haul Vernedet to the escape pod too, then detonate the explosives himself.

"All right," Pellaeon said, "Let's fix my mistake."

The one good thing about Demetrius Zaarin's arrival on *Majesty*'s bridge was that he didn't bring Darys with him. He had, in fact, not brought anyone aboard except for two guards and a Jedi child captured at Belsavis. The guards had transferred the child to *Majesty*'s holding cells, which left Zaarin to lurk around the bridge.

The destruction of Maressa had gone smoothly, and after taking the fastest sublight shuttle through the interdiction field, Zaarin arrived exactly thirty minutes later, just in time to see one of the more minor islands on the southern hemisphere light up.

"I have to admire your ruthlessness, Octavian," the commodore said followed Grant around the bridge like a shadow. "Though as far as I can tell, you've yielded little tangible results yet."

"Syne will be here," Grant said stiffly. "Then you'll see what tangible results look like. I know you haven't spotted many yourself lately."

Zaarin chuckled easily for a man whose mission had been a wash at best. "*Eye of Palpatine* was a mess, but it will fall on Keldor's head and no one else's. I guarantee it."

"Meaning what?" Grant was curious.

"The *Eye* was a top-secret project. Not even Tarkin or you knew about it. If the Emperor tries to punish us for what happened at Belsavis, he risks exposing the entire mess."

"How comforting," Grant said, half-honestly. He'd figured success against Jereveth Syne would insulate from him any failures at Belsavis, but a backup plan never hurt.

"Admiral!" Griff called from the tactical station, "A dreadnaught has just dropped out of hyperspace."

His pulse quickened. "Do you have an identification?"

"Her transponder marks her as *Iconoclast*."

"Excellent." Grant tried to hide his excitement as he walked over to the communications station. "Hail the ship. See if she responds."

Zaarin kept step and followed him. "One ship isn't a whole fleet. Slayke is still out there."

"I am aware of that, Commodore," Grant said. When he got to the comm station he made a point of not looking at Zaarin and asked the section lieutenant, "Do we have a response?"

The woman nodded. "I have *Iconoclast* on the line."

Grant pulled out his comlink. "Very good. Put her on."

There was a click, and then a woman's cool voice said, "This is Jereveth Syne. I am here to offer my surrender if you halt your attacks on Bavinyar."

"Straight to the point, lovely," Grant said. "I note that you have only brought one ship. We both know you have more."

"You asked for my surrender, Admiral Grant. *Only* mine."

"Where is Slayke?"

"He took his fleet and left."

"How convenient of him."

"He had no wish to be entangled in this fight. I asked for his assistance but he did not give in."

"Well, we both know there's little he could have done at any rate." He glanced at the large tactical display Griff was

standing next to. “I see you are approaching Bavinyar at maximum speed. Are you willing to be boarded?”

“As a show of trust, yes. It will take us time to meet with your ships. Promise me you will not fire on Bavinyar in the meantime.”

“Agreed. Two destroyers will be sent to intercept you. If they detect your weapons are hot, they will open fire.”

“Understood. Also understand that I will keep my shields up as they approach.”

“I’d expect nothing less. Is there anything else?”

“Not at the moment, Admiral.”

“Excellent. Grant, out.”

As he pocketed his comlink Zaarin said, “That's too easy. She's planning something.”

“Oh, I don't doubt that. The question is what it is and how futile it will be.”

Grant walked over to the tactical holo. Bavinyar was it its center, with targeted islands marked by red dots. Ships in the system were also marked; most formed a green ring around the planet, but *Iconoclast* and *Valediction* were both inbound, approaching from opposite sides of the interdiction field.

Pointedly addressing Captain Griff, he said, “Command *Valor* and *Resilient* to intercept Syne's ship. Tell them to approach with weapons hots and shields up. Move *Grappler* in their wake, fifty kilometers behind.”

As Griff relayed the orders, Zaarin said, “You're trying to extend the interdiction field, in case she tries to run for it.”

“It's possible. She may be trying to hit-and-run, or a distraction for another insertion.”

“You might end up putting *Grappler* in her line of fire. If we lose that drag ship-”

“We'll still have one more interdictor. And Syne would have to break past two destroyers to even reach *Grappler*, which is highly unlikely. Besides, I don't think she's planning on *that* kind of suicide.”

Zaarin frowned. “What kind *is* she planning then? What’s she after?”

“In all modesty, *me*.”

“You think she wants revenge for her father.”

“Syne comes from a noble line, in her fashion. Family is important to her.” It was something a low-born and shameless climber like Zaarin would never understand.

The commodore crossed thick arms over his chest. “Are you sure that's not your ego speaking, Octavian?”

He allowed a smile. “We'll see, won't we?”

Zaarin snorted. “You know, I hope she does try it. It'll make for a fun end to your little drama.”

Grant hoped she did too. It had been satisfying to send Marath Vooroo to Coruscant in chains, but Syne was different. She could be beaten but never humiliated; it was both admirable and frustrating.

As he watched her ship creep toward Bavinyar, his gut told him he was going to get his wish.

The ignition core to *Valediction*'s engines were buried in the heart of the ship. The massive spherical reaction chamber was walled in by other parts of the destroyer's superstructure on most sides, but the engineer's access area was a large chamber with three tiers of catwalks around a segment of the curving sphere.

Pellaeon and Vernedet arrived from the third tier. As captain, Pellaeon could disable the security protocols easily, though he doubted they would give much pause to the multifarious boarding party either.

It was the beating heart of a beautiful ship, and now Pellaeon was ordering the clones to lay explosive charges on all three tiers. They quickly clambered down the stairs to access the other catwalks, but Pellaeon and Vernedet stood against the top railing, looking down at the reactor core.

“Mynar, I know my apology can't be enough,” he said. He couldn't look at his friend's face.

"No, it's not." Vernedet said, level but angry. "Gil, I warned. You know that-"

An explosion rocked the catwalk and for a moment Pellaeon thought the grenades had gone off; then he saw smoke pour onto the tier beneath them and heard the distinctive hum of lightsabers.

The clones on the level beneath spun and started firing. They only got off a few shots before an invisible hand grabbed them and threw them hard against the side of the core. Then a man swept into view: tall, broad-shouldered, tan face marked by jagged tattoos, an emerald lightsaber in either hand.

Then a trio of black-armored 501st commandos swept in behind him. The clones on the third tier started firing over the railing. Pellaeon and Vernedet grabbed their weapons and shot down as well. The mutineers on the second tier scrambled for cover but the Jedi remained at the center of the platform, artfully batting back lasers with both sabers.

There was another explosion. More smoke furled up from the lowest tier, and the chamber filled with the sound of more blasterfire.

"Oh dammit," Pellaeon spat. "We're too late."

"Those charges are still down there." Vernedet reached for his belt.

"Mynar, what are you-"

"You!" he pointed to the nearest clone. "Get the captain to the escape pod! Now!"

"*Mynar!*"

Vernedet grabbed a grenade off his belt and ran toward the core. Pellaeon shouted at him but two clone troopers hooked their arms around his shoulders and ragged him back into the corridor. As the doors closed he saw the flash of two emerald blades as the Jedi leaped up onto the topmost catwalk, right in front of Vernedet-

-the door closed and the clones kept pulling him away. A second later the doors burst open and the hallway rocked with an explosion that sent all three of them to their feet.

Pellaeon fell with his face to the hard deck and waited, waited, for the explosion that would kill them all, but it didn't come. He couldn't see anything for the smoke or hear for the ringing in his ears.

Somehow, the clones got to their feet, grabbed him, and pulled him down the corridor. He still lived, and it could only mean his friend was dead.

The fight ended as fast as it began. Scorch, Boss, and Joc followed the big, dual-wielding Jedi onto the second tier and watched him dispatch two clones with ease. Fi and Fixer's party broke through on the second tier at the same time and quickly secured the area. Some Imp officer on the top level leaped for the core with a grenade in hand, and Hett had jumped up to intercept him. There was no time for finesse; the Jedi cut him in two with one swipe of the lightsaber, then Force-hurled his grenade down the adjacent corridor and pulled the blast doors shut.

There was one explosion, and then it was done.

Even with the fight over, nobody relaxed.

Corr directed Levet, Fixer, and Sull in disarming the explosive charges around the reactor core. Scorch immediately spotted Niner, stripped of his armor and helmet, standing between Fi and Parja with a rifle to one side, looking a little lost.

Scorch had been stuck in limbo just like the rest of them, not knowing whether Rede had slotted Niner or Dar. He'd mentally banished them both to the land of the dead, and just seeing one of them alive was enough to make him weak with relief.

"Good to see you around, *Ner'ika*," Scorch slapped him on the back. "Thanks for the loaner."

"Loaner?" Niner blinked. He really was out of it.

Scorch knocked his helmet. "Your *buy'c*. Without it we'd have never hooked up with Vau and pulled this off."

Niner's face went blank for a second, then he nodded. The poor barve wasn't close to okay.

"Fi, call Vau, then have Fixer take your group up to the bridge," Boss said.

"I thought it's mission accomplished," said Parja.

"Maybe. I want to check with our *jetii* minder."

Scorch followed Boss and Joc up the stairs to the top tier to see Hett standing over the body of the dead officer. It was a grotesque sight; the man had been cut through above the waist and his two halves laid awkwardly atop one another. The only mercy was that his face was firmly planted against the deck.

"I think that's the executive officer," Scorch said.

"Then where's Pellaeon?" asked Joc.

"*Joc'ika*, I don't think we're going to get him alive," Boss warned.

"We're also missing Hallena Devis, the last prisoner," said Hett.

"I want to save Hallena too," Joc said, "I'll put in a call to the bridge. See if they've spotted any of them on cams. Give me a sec."

Joc stepped aside from a private conversation in his helmet, leaving Boss, Scorch, and Hett to stand over the dead man's body.

"What's the status of the clone soldiers?" Hett's voice was a low growl.

"Looks like four wounded, six dead," said Boss.

The Jedi didn't reply. Scorch said, "You had to stop him. Otherwise we'd all be in little burned-up pieces."

Joc stepped back into the group. "Brant gave the cams a look-over. Says he's spotted a dark-skinned woman and a Five-oh-First trooper by the escape pods on V-deck. My guess is the captain's on his way."

"Okay," Hett said. "We'll go out the way we came."

There wasn't time to say goodbye to Fi's party. Hett went down the stairs and out into the corridor fast, and the three clones scampered to keep up with him.

As they walked, Scorch sidled along Boss and said, "One Five-oh-First commando, alone?"

"Must be Rede."

"I'll gonna kill him."

"Be careful," Joc warned. "We want Hallena safe. And Pellaeon too, if he's there."

"Rede killed Dar. No way he's getting off this ship."

"I know, but he's not the main priority. Besides, I bet our Jedi friend doesn't like your revenge kick."

Hett stopped and looked over his shoulder. Something in his hard eyes made Scorch shirk.

"I won't stop you," he said, and kept walking.

Somehow Pellaeon found the strength to stumble on. He should have done something- order the clones to take Hallena and escape without him, find some other way to sabotage *Valediction*, at least die bravely as Mynar had- but he couldn't think of anything.

The escape pods on V-deck were accessed from a narrow corridor. He saw Hallena and Rede waiting at the far end, and as he walked past the other sealed airlocks he saw that a number of pods bad already jettisoned. It was shameful for a captain to abandon his ship, but with *Valediction* seized and Vernedet dead, one more dose of shame hardly mattered. He could at least face his inevitable court martial like an officer and stand before the firing squad with a semblance of dignity.

He had no idea what do with Hallena. They stared at each other in the hallway but neither moved.

"Gil, I want you to know I'm sorry," she said. "I had no idea this would happen, any of it."

"We're too late for sorries."

He'd dropped his sidearm during the fight near the reactor, but one of the clones had given him a hold-out pistol for defense. It felt very heavy in his hand.

"Your friends have taken this ship." It was a statement, not a question, but she nodded anyway. "I suppose you'd like to be left with them."

"I'm in no position to ask for anything."

"No. But neither am I." His fingers twitched around his stock of his gun. He told Rede, "Open the airlock.

"Very good, sir," the clone said.

Rede pulled open the hatch to the escape pod. There was just enough room for the five of them inside.

"Is that what you want, Gil?" she asked. "Do you want to be executed together?"

That was the crux of it. He looked at the woman who'd taken everything from him without even meaning to. He didn't know if she deserved to die. He didn't want her too. He was sure of that, despite it all. Killing Hallena wouldn't bring Mynar back. He'd failed his oath, his duty, and all the men who trusted him and nothing could undo any of it.

Pellaeon swallowed. "Soldiers, let her go."

"Sir?" Rede asked. "Are you certain-"

"Yes, I'm-"

The sound of laserfire filled the hallway. Plasma bolts, blue and red, shot toward them from the opposite end. One clone was dropped by a lucky stun shot to the neck, another took a red bolt to his shoulder. Rede interposed himself between Pellaeon and the attackers and was immediately caught in the leg by a stun bolt. The clone staggered forward, still upright, when a half-dozen killing blasts took him in the chest and blew him off his feet.

Rede knocked into Pellaeon and both fell through the airlock. The remaining trooper jumped in after them and pulled the door shut behind them.

"Wait-" Pellaeon shouted. "Wait, Hallena!"

The escape pod shuddered and tumbled out into space. Pellaeon kicked himself free of Rede's body and pulled himself to the pod's tiny porthole, where he watched the gray wedge of his *Valediction*, his pride and his shame, shrink to nothing against the stars.

Scorch and Joc charged down the corridor toward the two prone bodies left on the deck. Scorch kept his weapon trained on the fallen soldier until he got close enough to

give the man's white armor a kick. He didn't budge; the stun shot had brought him down.

Joc and was crouched over the woman, touching her shoulder gently, saying, “Miss Devis? Are you all right?”

Scorch saw her fingers claw at the deck’s smooth durasteel. Her arms tightened but she didn't rise, didn't pick her face off the cold metal. Something in her didn't want to.

“Miss Devis, it's me. Joc, from Torrent Company.”

Her eyes opened. She pressed her palms flat against the floor and pushed herself up so she cold look at him.

“I know you can't tell, miss,” Joc said. “But it's me. In the airlock, was that Pellaeon?”

She shoved herself fully upright but stayed seated on the floor. Her voice was hollow as she said, “That was him.”

Something silent passed between her and Joc, something Scorch wasn't close to understanding, especially when his friend's face was hidden by his helmet's black mask.

“Lucky he escaped,” Joc said softly.

“No.” She closed her eyes. “Not for him.”

Scorch stared, uncomprehending, when Boss nudged his shoulder. His sarge said, “Good shooting, *ner vod*.”

“We don't know if it was him.”

“Ask her.”

It felt wrong to intrude on whatever the Devis woman's private grief was, but he asked, “Miss, do you know the name of that trooper in black armor?”

After a second, she said, “Rede. He called himself Rede. Did you know him?”

Scorch didn't know what to say.

Boss muttered, “He was in our unit.”

“I'm sorry,” she replied.

Scorch wasn't, and neither was Boss, but they could never explain it all to her just like she could never explain it all to them. Despite it all, theirs were two separate worlds.

Levet was at the head of the column, followed by Fi and Parja. Niner had never met Fi's *cyar'ika*; he'd heard of her

and wanted to see her, but he'd never imagined it would be like this. He lagged behind them while Fixer and Sull brought up the rear. They were en route to the bridge, walking through empty corridors and chambers where clones and mongrel officers lay numbed and writhing in their fever-haze, when the call came.

Niner didn't get it himself; he didn't have a helmet or a comlink. The call came to Fi, who dropped back from Parja and clapped Niner on the shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Just got a call from Scorch. Good news."

"What is it?"

"They tracked the captain down to the escape pods. He got away, but they grabbed the prisoner, one of Altis' people. Or Syne's, I can't remember."

"What's the good news?"

It wasn't a joke, but Fi laughed. "*Rede* was with 'em, covering the escape."

"Rede?" Niner had hardly thought about the clone since taking his stun blast to the face.

"They got him, Niner. Killed the *shabuir*." Fi squeezed his shoulder. "Means Dar can rest a little easier."

Niner didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to feel. He was still stuck in a void without direction or even grief. He didn't even know if he *should* feel grief for Rede, an empty husk of a man who never got a chance to be real, executed for a crime he didn't commit.

Fi noticed his blank expression and gave him another squeeze. "It'll be okay, *Ner'ika*. You're with your *vode* now. We're never splitting up, never again."

Niner nodded, and was very relieved when Fi took his hand away.

In his long and eventful life, Kal Skirata had never stood at the helm of a star destroyer. The crew, now a weird mix of clones and mongrel commandos, worked in the pits beneath him and the big forward viewport revealed a

panorama of deadly pale gray warships hovering over the blue face of Bavinyar. It was an exhilarating, empowering sensation, so different from fighting in the trenches with his boys. For an instant he understood how a self-important it made me like Grant feel.

An instant was as long as it lasted. He turned away from the stunning view and watched his sons march onto the bridge: Fi led the way with Parja at his side, followed by Corr, Levet, and Spar. Niner in his black jumpsuit and Fixer in black armor brought up the rear.

"Mission accomplished, *buir*," Fi walked out onto the platform that spanned between the two crew pits and clapped Skirata on the forearm.

Fi took a moment to look around the bridge. The other Deltas and Yayax had yet to return, but everyone else had converged on the command deck. Vau still stood by the viewport with Lord Mird sitting on its haunches beside him. Jaing and Mereel were down in the crew pit and Ordo was by the tactical station with Brant and Spar.

Jusik stood on the port side of the bridge with a hastily-made sling supporting his wounded shoulder. He had his helmet off and wore a tired, almost wistful expression that made him look much older than he was. Tay'haai's *beskar* flute hung from his belt, another shiny cylinder to match his lightsaber. Across the bridge, looking especially out of place, a tall old Ho'din in Jedi robes stood with his hands braced against the back of an empty seat.

"We did it," Fi said, half to himself.

Skirata nodded. There had been too many losses, and he knew the grief would catch up to him soon enough, but for now he allowed himself to savor victory.

His family was together, finally, and they'd never be torn apart again.

"*Buir*," Ordo called, "*Iconoclast* is getting close to the destroyers."

Skirata looked to the comm station. "Anything from Syne?"

"No signal yet," Soru reported.

"It'll be any time now," Vau said as he walked down the aisle. "We need to get ready."

Up ahead, hovering over the blue glow of Bavinyar, was *Delayer*. The interdictor looked like a flat star destroyer with spherical gravity well projectors swelling on either side of the hull.

"Take us close to the drag ship," Vau said. "Just close enough to fire. Don't make 'em suspicious. And get a firing solution ready."

Affirmatives came from Syne's commandos, who were manning most of the systems aside from communications and tactical. When the fight was over, this would be their ship, and Skirata didn't begrudge them the prize his boys had claimed. Standing on this bridge felt good, but it wasn't for him. Spending too much time on a ship like this went to a man's head and gave him delusions of grandeur.

"We've got a call from *Majesty*," Soru reported, voice tense. "They're asking why several of our escape pods have just ejected."

"*Shab*," Vau snapped. "Tell 'em we've had a series of mechanical failures, but we're getting them under control."

"Will they believe that?" Fi asked.

"For a couple minutes, maybe, which is all that matters." Vau planted his fists on his hips and watched *Delayer* swing along their starboard side. It was a very tempting target, and all they needed was Syne's last signal.

"They're requesting to speak to Captain Pellaeon," Soru said grimly.

"Tell 'em he'll be a couple minutes," Fi muttered.

"*Buir*, they're sending out shuttles to recover the pods now," Ordo reported. "They'll probably find Pellaeon in one of them."

"Okay, *shab* the wait-a-minute plan," Vau said. "Guns, take aim on that drag ship."

"We're supposed to wait for a signal from Syne," Ordo reminded them.

Skirata looked back at the tactical holo. *Iconoclast* was almost between the two destroyers. She would be making a break for it any second now.

"I say close enough," Vau told him.

"Agreed."

"You want to give the order or should I?"

It was uncharacteristically generous of Vau, and Skirata saw no reason not to take him up on the offer. He turned to the gunnery station.

"Weapons, take aim."

"Standing by."

He pointed at the gray wedge of the drag ship, felt that dangerous sense of power shudder through him, and snapped his fingers.

"Fire."

Grant was standing in front of the tactical station, staring at Syne's dreadnaught move between *Valor* and *Resilient*, when lights started flashing on the other side of the planet's curve. Suddenly the entire deck seemed to buckle.

A tightness gripped Grant's chest. He knew that sensation; he'd felt it at Farstine just days ago. It meant that an artificial gravity well had suddenly died.

"Admiral, we have a problem," Griff said, voice tense.

Grant looked at the holo. *Delayer*'s marker was flashing green and red, and right next to it, easily within firing range, was Captain Pellaeon's *Valediction*.

"Admiral we're getting reports from *Pulsar* and *Unvanquished*. They're saying *Valediction* just fired on *Delayer*."

"Comm," Grant snapped, "Get me a line to Pellaeon! Now!"

"Admiral," said the comm officer, "We're getting no response. *Pulsar* also detected a series of escape pods ejecting from the ship right before the attack. They're trying to recover them now."

"Have *Pulsar* and *Unvanquished* pen that ship in, and keep hailing *Valediction*." Grant turned to Zaarin, still breathing down on his neck. "Was it the Jedi? Could that prisoner have done something? Taken over Pellaeon's mind, maybe?"

"They had him pumped full of too many drugs to count," Zaarin shook his head. "Unless that witch Darys did something."

"Sirs, there's another possibility." Melusar appeared suddenly behind them and made them both jump; he was almost as bad as the Inquisitor. "The ship may have been boarded."

"Boarded?" Zaarin scowled. "How? By whom?"

Before Melusar could answer, Griff said, "Sirs, *Iconoclast* is making a run for it!"

Grant looked back to the tactical holo. Sure enough, the dreadnaught was slipping between *Valor* and *Resilience*. The two *Venator*-class destroyers were firing full broadsides at the passing ship but her shields were just barely withstanding the attacks.

Griff said, "Admiral, she's heading for *Grappler*."

One drag ship down, one left. "Get me a line to that ship! Call her! Now!"

It took an interminable few seconds to call *Iconoclast*, and Grant watched on the holo as the dreadnaught, battered but still flying, limped past the two destroyers and plowed a direct course for the interdictor.

"Admiral," said communications, "We've got Syne."

"Give her to me. *Now*." He flicked his comlink on and stalked away from Zaarin and Melusar. "Madam Syne, this is foolish. Lay down your arms *now*."

"I'm sorry, Vice Admiral, I won't be doing that." Her voice sounded smooth, almost smug.

"Your vessel is heavily damaged. Even if you make it to *Grappler* you can't outfight it."

"I don't need to outfight it, Admiral."

The dreadnaught inched closer. Realization struck. His jaw dropped. “No.”

“We have little to say to each other, Admiral. This signal will be cutting out in a minute, so I'm sorry we can't speak longer.”

“You'll be killed. Your whole ship-”

“I'm not *on* the ship, though I am using it as a relay point for this comm signal. I’m not even in the Bavinyar System; at least, not yet. Those old slave circuits come in handy sometimes. Goodbye, Admiral.”

There was a click, and she was gone.

“Admiral,” Griff said, “*Valediction* has started to fire on *Unvanquished*. *Pulsar* is moving to help but-”

“Pull *Grappler* back!” he stabbed a finger toward the interdictor's green marker. “Now!”

“Of course, sir, but it will take a moment-”

“*Now*!”

Griff hurried. Grant knew he was shouting, knew he was drawing stares, knew he was making a total embarrassment of himself, but none of that mattered.

His humiliation had just begun. He knew it, and he couldn't do a damn thing about it except watch.

Suddenly he didn't envy ship captains, not at all.

“*Grappler* is turning around, sir,” Griff reported, “But it looks like *Iconoclast* might try to flank it.”

“She's not flanking. We need-” his mind sputtered. He knew what was coming and stared at the tactical holo, ignoring *Iconoclast*, ignoring *Valediction*. “I want all ships to fall back to their initial siege formation.”

“You mean spread them out?”

“Yes, I want *all* ships to prepare for-”

The command deck shuddered again, and all of *Majesty* seemed to groan as her internal gravity struggled to adjust to the collapse of *Grappler*'s interdiction field.

Grant steadied himself and turned his attention to the holo. *Iconoclast* and *Grappler* were both gone. Just as he knew it would, the space around Bavinyar suddenly filled with

dozens of red markers. Alarm klaxons wailed and crewmen shouted in confusion, but Grant turned his attention to the forward viewport, where ship after ship fell from hyperspace into Bavinyar's natural gravity well and plunged toward the planet too fast for his net to seize them.

26

"I've met people, years later, who still remember what we did at Bavinyar. They think it was a miracle and in a way they're right. Mandalorians don't usually get to be heroes. We don't even have a word for it in Mando'a. *That time, though, we were, and I'm proud of that, but in the end we didn't capture that star destroyer to save all those people on the planet. We did it to save Boss, Scorch, Fixer, and Niner. That was it. That was all we needed."*

Scout's stomach nearly jumped up through her throat as *Chu'unthor* plunged into the planet's atmosphere. The heat of entry flared up on all sides of the big ship's command deck, obscuring the ocean world below behind walls of flame.

Scout gripped the back of one the helmsman's seat as the ship shuddered all around her. She looked to her side to see Master Altis, legs spread for balance, hands behind his back, looking surprisingly calm as firelight flashed over his face.

"Are you sure we can handle this?" she called over the roar and re-entry.

"I kept this ship in Bespin's atmosphere for years. She'll be fine."

The fires fell away but the ship kept shaking as they tumbled toward the sparking waters below. She spotted an archipelago spreading out to the north, including one large island that must have been Cephalia, Bavinyar's center of

population. She could spot a number of craft already in the air, probably all stuffed with people, breaking for space while the new ships swooped down to grab more evacuees.

Altis moved over to the comm station and flipped a switch. “Lukan, Ranik, are you ready to detach?”

Scout heard two affirmatives, then Altis said, “Good. Do it now.”

Chu'unthor slowed its descent and vectored toward Cephalia. Scout felt a moment of calm, and then the entire superstructure vibrated and groaned, as though it was being torn in pieces.

Altis put a hand on her shoulder. “Settle down, Scout.”

She felt calm pour through her and with it understanding. *Chu'unthor* hadn't just been put together from pieces of multiple ships, it *was* multiple ships. The deck shuddered again, and she saw two blocky sections of the ship jump ahead under power of their own flaring engines.

“We can take in more people this way,” Altis squeezed her shoulder. “Scout, can you get down to the loading bay?”

“Absolutely.”

“Excellent. I'll call Kina Ha. She'll help.”

Scout was down the hall and in the turbolift before she paused to wonder what the ancient Kaminoan could do to help the rescue efforts. Every atmosphere-capable ship in Syne and Slayke's fleets, from big carriers like *Chu'unthor* down to tramp freighters like *Cornucopia*, were diving down toward pre-assigned targets while big ships like *Valedicton* and *Freedom Song* desperately tried to hold open an escape corridor.

It was a mad scramble, only partially orchestrated by careful planning on Syne's part through a series of extra-encrypted messages to local governments on Bavinyar's islands, telling the settlers when and where to prepare for evacuation.

The lift doors slid open and Scout sprinted for the landing bay. She was almost there when she stumbled and

fell against the wall. A surge of thought and feeling came out of nowhere and overtook her. She suddenly felt Altis on the main ship's bridge, Ash Jarvee in the bay of another ship, Ranik Solusar giving orders to the crew of the third. Master Plett on *Valediction*'s bridge, all the other Altisian Jedi scattered throughout the rescue fleet. She even felt the throttle of *Aay'han* vibrating against the hands of its Jedi pilot while Besany manned the co-pilot's station. She saw what they saw without really seeing it, understood what they did without consciously knowing.

At the center of it all, sitting calmly in *Chu'unthor*'s lush greenhouse under the bright light of a real sun, Kina Ha was bridging all their minds together.

It was like nothing she'd ever experienced. She could have lost herself in so many different minds, most of the more naturally attuned to the Force than hers, but *Chu'unthor* shuddered and her head smacked against a bulkhead.

Pain brought her back to her body. She kept running down the corridor until she reached the main landing bay. The big hangar was shockingly empty again; even the starfighters had gone to fly interference for the rescue ships. Through its open mouth, Scout saw the buildings and streets and squares of Cephalia surge toward them.

The ship swooped down over what Scout realized was a massive public park. What was normally green space was now packed shoulder-to-shoulder with tens of thousands of people, all desperate to escape the Empire's bombardment.

That wave of desperation, the enormity of their task, nearly overtook her, but Kina Ha spoke soft encouragement in her mind. Scout rushed to the mouth of the hangar and joined Altis' Jedi as they ushered the thousands onboard.

Ships were already escaping. *Valediction* had become the centerpoint of the escape corridor. Slayke's broad Soro-Suub carrier and a group of other medium-sized warships

had settled on the destroyer's flanks, and together they formed a protective core around the fleeing ships.

Grant found himself caught in a dilemma he should have seen coming. To break the main escape route, he needed to converge at least a third of his siege forces on *Valediction* but in doing so he'd draw ships away from other locations and create new escape vectors. A no-win situation for Syne had suddenly turned around; now Grant was the one scrambling to limit his humiliation, and the worst part of it it all was that Zaarin of all people had warned him about putting *Grappler* too close to Syne's dreadnaught.

Thankfully, the commodore wasn't in the mood to gloat.

Majesty shuddered under another round of turbolaser fire from Slayke's flagship. Grant held on tight to the tactical console but Zaarin nearly stumbled into a bulkhead. *Freedom Song* had positioned itself between *Majesty* and *Valediction*, and Grant had called two more destroyers to help with Slayke. That would probably open another hole in the fleet, but at this point he wanted to deal with the warships first. It would take time for the largest rescue vessels to load themselves to full capacity and, hopefully, he could deal with the primary capital ships before then and re-create the initial siege formation.

"Admiral," Griff reported, "*Valor* and *Resilient* are coming back into the combat zone. They're requesting orders."

"Have *Valor* take position at sector 7B. *Resilient* takes 8C." It would patch up the holes in the net and force the escaping ships to all take the route past *Valediction*; hopefully that gap would close soon too.

Zaarin stumbled up to Grant's side. "It will take hours for them to evacuate everyone on that planet, *days*. There's no way they can hold out that long."

"I am aware of that, Commodore," Grant said stiffly as another turbolaser barrage rocked their shields. "That's why I'm prioritizing combat against the fleet."

"Send our fighters down, as many as you can. Most of those transport ships are unarmed. You can take them down easily."

Grant considered, then told Griff, "Captain, launch our full fighter wing to the planet. The same for *Valor* and *Resilient.* Targets of opportunity."

"Very good, sir."

The ship shook again. Grant looked at Zaarin and said, "Without a defensive fighter screen we'll be especially vulnerable."

"So will they. They'll pull their own fighters to protect the evacuees."

"Have you called Farstine for reinforcements?"

Grant had held off on that so far; calling for help would make his humiliation even worse. "We can hold them for now."

Zaarin looked skeptical, but he didn't object. Grant looked at the planet and saw a swarm of tiny dark flecks against the blue, all falling toward Bavinyar to join the fight.

We'd placed ourselves at the heart of a firestorm, but at first we stayed mercifully safe from the fray. Slayke and Syne had surrounded our ship with their own fleet and were doing their best to defend us while we provided cover for the stream of ships that had been waiting to leave Bavinyar.

After the first ten minutes nearly a hundred ships had escaped, but they were all tiny. Bavinyar was a world of self-reliant settlers and many of them, especially the ones on the smaller islands, had their own ships. Some of those were hyperspace-capable but many weren't, and those that couldn't escape on their own flew into our hangar or that of Slayke's big carrier. *Fat Bastard* only had limited room, as did we, but after the initial gush of escaping ships the stream thinned out.

The reason was obvious. Those ships had all been waiting to escape Grant's siege grid. A second, larger wave

of ships had plunged toward the planet at the same time with the goal of evacuating people without ships of their own, especially those on the most populated island of Cephalia.

To get that second, larger fleet out, we'd have to hold the line against all of Grant's forces. This was a situation where I thought Vau and *Kal'buir* might decide to try and run, even though most of the crew now manning our hijacked destroyer was originally from Syne's late flagship. To my surprise they stood their ground, bravely, even as enemy starfighters began to sting our shields and buzz our bridge.

Most of the friendly starfighters had already been sent down into the atmosphere to protect the evacuation ships, and with a critical crew shortage, we had to rely on *Valediction*'s gunnery computers to slap away the enemy attackers. Luckily for us, they were the newest and best computers in the Imperial fleet, and with a few minor tweaks they were easy to turn against their makers.

When the fight started I felt an awareness probing my mind. Through the Force I felt Master Plett, standing across the room. Beyond him I felt so many others minds, mostly strangers, but I could discern some individual Jedi: Altis giving orders at the helm of his ship, Scout trying to direct a flood of frightened people, Ash Jarvee pulling up from one small island and swooping down on another.

At the center of it all was Kina Ha, ancient calm at the eye of the massive storm.

It was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. For so long the Force had been something mystical and elusive, something I could only control for short flickering moments. As I'd fallen away from the Jedi I'd started to view it as a tool, like a wrench or a scalpel and nothing more. But right then, for the first time, maybe the only time, I felt a sense of belonging and communion through the Force, as though I were one harmonious part of something so much bigger.

It was what I'd always wanted and never found, not until I left the Force behind all together and became a Skirata.

I wanted to pull myself away, but I couldn't. It was everything I craved and feared as a Force-user, all happening at the same time.

For that brief moment, as the firestorm spun around me, I let myself feel it all and become part of it all, and everyone's thoughts and motions became my thoughts and motions, and I wasn't afraid, because I like one piece of a dance that was so much larger than myself.

I wish I could help you understand it better, *Kad'ika*, but there is no way for me to do it. The truth is always greater than the words we use to describe it.

Chu'unthor was a mammoth ship with more corridors, storage rooms, and holding decks that Scout could keep track of. Holding her lightsaber over her head like a luminous blue beacon, she helped guide the streams of refugees out from the jam-packed hangar bay.

She led small children clinging to their mothers, limping grandparents, fit young men asking how they could help defend the ship. She'd heard Bavinyari didn't like Jedi but you wouldn't know it then. Desperation bred trust, and Scout did all she could to save as many trusting beings as possible.

Like all of Altis' people, she wore a comlink in her ear connecting her to the rest of the crew, but she barely needed it. Like all the other Jedi at Bavinyar, she found herself connected to a larger shared awareness. She knew, through easy intuition, to guide refugees into holds she'd never seen before. She knew when the ship was getting close to maximum capacity. She knew when the Imperial fighters were raining down on them and she knew when the motley defenders took to the air and chased the Imp fighters back.

She knew when the ship was finally full to the brim, weighted down by so many thousands that its engines

strained to push off from Bavinyar's surface. She raced up to the command deck where she knew Altis would be standing behind the helmsman. Bright sunlight spilled through the viewport, and the blue sky beyond was scarred by pillars of black smoke and the occasional explosion of a downed starfighter.

Scout came beside Altis and asked (though she barely needed to speak), “Master, are we ready to go?”

“There are still people down there,” the old Jedi said.

“We've done all we can. We need to call Lukan and Ranik back, then get out of here.”

Altis hesitated for a moment, then nodded. He didn't have to speak the order; knowledge rippled through Kina Ha's mind meld. *Chu'unthor*'s engines groaned audibly in protest but she rose into the sky nonetheless. Cephalia's parks and squares and buildings fell away; so did the glimmer of its oceans and the dark green ridges of surrounding islands. Then there was just the sky.

The other two sections of *Chu'unthor* appeared before them. Only the main section, on which Scout now stood, was capable of jumping to hyperspace, and all three segments slowed down to reconnect. It made them especially vulnerable to the enemy snubfighters that swarmed through the sky.

Friendly fighters in turn came to defend them. Scout felt one Jedi pilot slip behind an ARC fighter in his Starchaser and, with slight regret, thumb the trigger and blow two clone pilots out of the sky. At the same time, she felt Ranik Solusar’s ship tremble beneath him as it took a missile to its shields. She felt another Jedi shoot down an Eta-2 right before her own engine exploded, sending her into a death-spiral that knocked her head around but didn't steal her consciousness, not until her ship hit the ocean surface and went through it, and dark water swallowed everything.

The woman's confused last moments stabbed through the mind meld but Kina Ha compensated with her own feelings of confidence and warmth. Lukan’s and Ranik’s

sections of *Chu'unthor* locked into place. Three sets of engines fired in unison and the carrier soared skyward once again.

The sun fell away and so did the sky and strings of light clouds. Stars peeked through the fading blue, and beyond the stars Scout saw the chaos of battle. Capital ships pounded each other's shields and lit up the void with washes of green and red plasma. An Imperial star destroyer hit one of Syne's picket ships with barrage after barrage until it exploded, and though there were no Jedi on that ship, Scout could still feel the pain of violently extinguished lives.

Kina Ha still projected calm through the mind meld, but confidence faltered. Hundreds of beings were still dying over Bavinyar, and there would surely be thousands more left behind on the planet. There simply wasn't enough time or enough ships.

"Master, we can't do it. We can't save them all."

Altis's hand was firm on her shoulder. "We never can. Focus on those who *live*, Scout. They live because of you."

Somehow, through the meld, Scout could feel them too, even through all those refugees couldn't touch the Force.

But of course they could; everything could.

The Force was *life*.

She felt all the life on the decks beneath her: the angry young patriots swearing revenge for ruined homes, the confused wailing infants, the old people shocked to have survived, the mothers trying not to lose their small children in the packed crowds.

For a moment she felt, with crystalline clarity, the thoughts of a young woman about her age, pressed together with a teenage boy in a cramped and foul-smelling storage room. Their hands were clasped tight, fingers intertwined; their heads were bowed low. They'd lost their homes and families but they stared into each other's eyes and felt only the pure rush of adolescent love. It conquered all fear and doubt and nearly brought Scout to tears.

But it was too much; it was all too much. She gasped, her mind reeled, and she tried to focus on the stars ahead as they peeked through a dimming blue sky.

Altis still had his hand on her shoulder. He squeezed it again. “It's all right, Scout. We're almost free.”

Without prelude or explanation, Jusik said, “They're coming out!”

He hadn't said anything since the battle started and for a second Skirata didn't know what he was talking about. Then he saw the tactical holo, and the marker designating Master Altis' ship as it broke out of the atmosphere and cut a straight line for the exit corridor guarded by *Valediction* and *Fat Bastard*.

Their smaller ships were crumbling under heavy fire from the encroaching ring of star destroyers. Slayke's Commerce Guild cruiser, *Freedom Song*, was getting pounded by Grant's flagship and two more destroyers. In redistributing his ships, Grant had left holes in the siege net, and many smaller ships were now slipping past and leaping to hyperspace, but *Chu'unthor* was big, sluggish, unarmed, and crammed with over two hundred thousand people. It needed a secure escape corridor and there was only one of those.

Skirata stalked over to the tactical station and asked, “How long until Altis passes through, *Ord'ika*?”

“Maybe five minutes, *buir*. Not sure we can last that long.”

“This is one of the best ships in the Imp fleet, isn't it?”

“Not when she's outnumbered and undermanned,” Ordo said, and right on cue, the deck shuddered as a volley of turbolaser blasts exploded on their port shields. An Imp destroyer, *Victory*-class, had crippled one of Syne's picket ships and was coming straight at them.

The shields held but the deck kept shaking. Skirata staggered over to Vau, who stood with Fi and Spar on the central aisle between the crew pits.

"We're out of time," Spar said when he saw Skirata coming. "Get us out of here while we still can."

"Not yet."

"We've done our good deed," Vau said.

"Altis is still coming." Skirata jabbed a finger at the tactical holo.

Another heavy blast shook the ship. Spar said, "I came all this way 'cos I wanted another sixty years. I'm not dying here."

It was a veiled threat, and if Vau backed Spar up it might have weight, but even if they did try and run it wouldn't do much good, not with the vicstar moving to cut them off from the edge of the gravity well.

"*Buir*!" Ordo called, "Something's happening!"

"What *thing?*" Skirata hurried back to the tactical station, Vau on his heels.

"That one picket, the one that's crippled, it's moving."

Skirata watched the holo and saw the small marker of the picket approaching the big one for the vicstar. The destroyer started firing back at the picket but the smaller ship didn't slow down.

"Aw, *shab*," said Vau, "She's going to ram."

Skirata felt tight in the chest. When *Iconoclast* had plunged into *Grappler* and brought the interdiction field down, it had been totally stripped and unmanned, operated by remote slave circuit. This picket had a full crew compliment, but they were going to do the same thing anyway.

Kal Skirata didn't often feel humbled by the bravery of *aruetiise*, but he did then.

He and Vau went up to the forward viewport to try and get a look. The vicstar was cutting in from their port side and they could see space light up as it fired all its turbos at the picket ship coming up behind it. The picket seemed to be vectoring for the flare of its engines, which helped avoid the line-of-fire for most of the vic's weapons.

"Guns!" Skirata called, "Pound that *buir'shabuir*, right on the nose!"

Syne's crew didn't need further instruction. Green energy lanced out from *Valediction*'s broadside cannons and impacted on the vic's forward shields. The destroyer didn't have enough juice in it to keep both fore and aft shields at full power. Wisely, it held the rear shields up and voluntarily took a pounding on its forward section, but even that wasn't enough to stop the picket at full charge.

The smaller ship seemed to disappear in the blue-white glare of the vic's engines; then a massive explosion tore through the hull. It engines and even its command tower vanished in a burst of flame and heat-twisted metal.

"Keep firing!" Skirata shouted over the cheers that shook the bridge. "Kill it! Kill it!"

Valediction's guns chewed up the forward section of the vicstar's wedge. Its shields were gone and it began shooting out escape pods as its carcass smoldered in space.

"Not bad, Kal," Vau said. "You'd make a good Imp captain."

"Don't even joke about that." He waved a hand. "*Ord'ika*, where's Altis?"

"He's ready to pass through," Jusik said from the other side of the bridge.

"*Bard'ika*'s right," Ordo glanced at the tactical display. "Is he good to go?"

"Tell him to get clear," Skirata said.

A half-minute later the ugly, bulky carrier cut between *Valediction* and *Fat Bastard*. The flare from *Chu'unthor*'s engines twinkled like dwindling stars, then disappeared as it jumped to hyperspace.

"Are we good now?" asked Vau.

"I think we are. Comm, tell Slayke we've gonna break for it. Suggest he does the same. Helm, give us a course and get us out of here."

Syne's people gave no objections. As they pointed their nose for the stars and kicked in all engines, *Fat Bastard* did

the same. A few little freighters and shuttles fleeing the planet lanced ahead of them and winked into hyperspace, while three remaining star destroyers attempted to give chase, but in the end they were too far away.

Infinity blurred around them and they jumped to hyperspace. The crew erupted in cheers again. Vau pounded a fist on Skirata's back. Spar clapped his hands and Parja gave Fi a *beskar*-clanking bear hug. Soru and Brant slumped exhausted in their seats. Ordo, Mereel, and Jaing clapped each other on the shoulders. In the far corner, Master Plett watched silently, an ambiguous smile on his lipless Ho'din face.

He saw Jusik standing apart from everyone else. When Skirata went up to the man and called his name, Jusik seemed to wobble on his feet. He stared at his father and blinked like he was seeing him for the first time.

Skirata steadied him with a hand on the shoulder. “You okay, *Bard'ika*?”

“I'll be fine, *buir*,” The young man nodded, but he looked like he'd just lost something forever.

Octavian Grant stood on *Majesty*'s bridge and watched them withdraw. *Valediction* and the carrier went first, followed by Slayke's other big ships. *Freedom Song* was already disentangling itself from a four-ship fight, and though Grant ordered pursuit, Slayke's flagship was able to limp its way out of the gravity well and disappear into hyperspace.

Small ships were still running through the gaping holes in the blockade. Grant walked over to Captain Griff and said, softly and calmly, “Tell all remaining ships to resume their initial positions in the siege grid.”

The young man stared a question at him. Grant repeated the order, and that time Griff obeyed.

Grant turned away from the holo, from the view of Bavinyar's blue oceans far below. Melusar stood to one side of the bridge, hand over his mouth, looking paler than

usual. Zaarin had thick arms crossed in front of his chest; his eyes met Grant's but he didn't say anything.

"Admiral?" Griff asked, "What should we do about the remaining settlements on the surface?"

There would be some beings left, surely; probably a good many. He thought about ordering a complete bombardment of the remaining islands, but he knew it wouldn't do anything to salvage the battle, or his mood.

"Let them be," he sighed. "Syne's earned her victory."

After a pause, Griff said, "Very good, sir."

"Captain, remove us from orbit and set course for Farstine. If you don't mind, I'd like to use your command salon until we arrive."

"Feel free to, sir."

He turned for the exit and started walking. He kept his back stiff and his head high but didn't look any of the passing crewmen in the eye.

He left the bridge with his dignity intact. It wasn't a lot, but he didn't have much left, and he knew he'd have less still when his superiors were done with him.

27

"Some people still call it the 'Miracle at Bavinyar.' They say it gave confidence and inspiration to resistance movements across the galaxy. The Imperial networks did their best to muzzle the news of it, but people still heard. We- your family and I- never planned to get involved in it. We didn't even want *to; it put us in Imperial crosshairs for years to come. But we did it. Sometimes I'm proud of that. Sometimes I want to undo everything just to get your father and uncles back to us. In the end, what I want doesn't matter. I just have to live with it. And now, so do you."*

The blue holographic image of Wilhuff Tarkin's face took on an almost skeletal quality. His high cheekbones, bald pate, and sunken eyes all created the impression of a human skull, stripped of skin and bone. The blackness of space, seen through the window of Octavian Grant's office on Farstine Station, sat behind the holo and only seemed to enhance the ghoulish image.

Of course, it might have just been Grant's mood.

Back straight, hands at his side, he told Tarkin, "I realize there is no excuse for a failure such as this, sir. I am fully prepared to accept the consequences of both the events at Bavinyar, and Belsavis."

Tarkin raised a thin eyebrow. "Is that so, Vice Admiral? *Both* of them?"

"The events are inextricably linked, sir. It's hard to explain one without the other."

"And why do you say that?"

"Sir, it is very clear that the attack on Bavinyar would never have succeeded had the enemy not been able to hijack *Valediction*. Such an event is virtually unprecedented, and was only possible through a unique combination of factors."

"Have you had a chance to debrief crew who escaped?"

"We have, sir, including the captain."

"The captain survived when his ship was captured?"

"Indeed, sir. He tells... an interesting story."

"I'm sure he does."

"It's been corroborated by other crew who escaped. I have no reason to doubt him, though his story is, as I said, quite extraordinary."

"Please go on."

"It appears that *Valediction* was hijacked by a combined force of Syne's commandos, Mandalorians, and Jedi."

Tarkin blinked. "That is an unlikely combination."

"Exactly, sir. The intruders were able to pump the ship's air full of a virus. We've analyzed samples recovered from crew members and determined it to be a variation on non-lethal rhincyria, modified to take effect very quickly."

"From which the intruders were already immune?"

"Yes, sir."

"Curious."

"Incredible as this all is, sir, I think there is something even more important."

"Do tell."

"After the unfortunate incident with the *Eye of Palpatine*, I sent four backup squadrons of commandos on detachment from the Vader's Fist to Belsavis. They were on *Valediction* when she came back to Bavinyar. According to multiple witnesses, the intruders were fighting alongside soldiers from the Five-oh-First."

Not even Tarkin could his his shock there. The 501st were the most elite special forces unit in the Imperial Army. Mutiny from them should have been impossible.

It was also something authorities would try very hard to keep hidden, especially from the larger military. News of desertion by clone soldiers was carefully suppressed; a full-blown mutiny was far worse.

"I believe," Grant continued, "that many clone commando units were specially trained by Mandalorian mercenaries on Kamino. I believe the motivation behind the mutinous troops is easy to conclude."

"This is a very serious issue," Tarkin said. "Have you spoken with the unit's captain? Or was he lost with *Valediction*?"

"He's onboard Farstine station right now. I was waiting to talk to you before I proceeded with him."

Tarkin stared at him hard from across the stars. "Vice Admiral, I would like you to look into this matter. Someone must be held accountable. Do not think, however, that it will absolve you from full responsibility for what happened at Bavinyar, *and* Belsavis."

"Of course, sir. I just want to make sure we have the facts about everything that happened before we put a public face on these events. We'll have to be very careful."

Tarkin understood his meaning. "There are discussions I need to have as well. Once you have dealt with the Five-oh-First captain, please call me again."

"Very good, sir. Farstine command, out."

Tarkin's holo winked to nothing. Grant let go of a long breath and stared down at the polished wood of his desk, wondering whether to break out a shot of brandy before he went to see Melusar.

No, not yet. This was the most important part of all.

He found Melusar in the small office the captain had been assigned. The room had no viewport and barely enough space for a desk and it spoke nothing of rank or authority. A good leader had to stand above his troops and command them with the threat of discipline. It was instantly plain to Grant how Melusar had lost control over his men.

The captain was seated at his desk. He had his hands folded on the desktop and looked up at Grant with cold blue eyes. “May I help you, sir?”

Grant didn't sit down. “Captain, the survivors from *Valediction* have been debriefed. I imagine you'd like to know what became of your men on the star destroyer.”

“Thank you for coming to me, Admiral. I appreciate that.”

He looked down into those pale eyes and wondered if the man had any idea of what had happened, or what was going to happen to him. All the reports said Melusar was a true believer, earnest, even zealous. His unit had a good record at hunting down Jedi because of it, but he seemed to have no clue of the bigger nature of things, even when they were about to stomp him underfoot.

Grant felt sorry for the man, but he'd do what had to be done.

“We believe some of your troops assisted a squad of Mandalorian commandos and Jedi in capturing *Valediction*,” he said bluntly.

Melusar's eyes went wide but he kept his hands firmly clasped on the desktop. “Is there proof of that, sir?”

“Numerous witnesses say groups of soldiers in black Five-oh-First armor were fighting alongside the Mandalorians. We can only assume it was they who helped the Mandalorians board *Valediction* in the first place.”

Melusar's tongue flicked out, licked dry lips, and was gone.

“Captain, is there anything you might tell me that can help provide a clearer picture of this situation? Without *Valediction*, Syne would never have been able to break the siege at Bavinyar.”

“I understand. Sir, a number of my clone commandos were trained by Mandalorian sergeants on Kamino. It was common practice.”

“I'm aware of that. Was there anything suspect about the *specific* clones you sent to *Valediction*?” Melusar would

know all of them by name and background; he was that kind of a captain.

"I believe so, sir." He nodded slightly. "Several of the clones on that team were trained by a certain Kal Skirata. Shortly before to mission to Belsavis, I sent a detachment of three clones to Mandalore to capture a group of Jedi reportedly hiding on-planet."

"And they were Skirata's clones. Were they in contact with him?"

To his credit, Melusar didn't hesitate. "They were. I knew that and allowed them to precede because I thought it was the best way to flush out the Jedi Skirata was working with."

"Clearly, you thought wrong."

Melusar nodded again. "I know sir. I misjudged the situation entirely. I believe we could have still trapped them at Mandalore, but the local garrison was incompetent."

"So Skirata escaped, and he helped Syne steal the ship she needed to break the siege and humiliate the Empire."

"That seems to be the short of it, sir."

"Do you think there are more mutinies waiting to happen in the Five-oh-First, Captain?"

"I believe all the clones trained by Skirata have already defected or deserted, sir."

Melusar didn't blink or look away. He was a fool but no coward. Grant thought about the tack to use next. For a man like Melusar, there was only one thing to appeal to.

"This matter will have to be thoroughly investigated," Grant said. "In the process, it will have to come to light that a number of the Emperor's finest troops mutinied when they should have been under your command."

Melusar licked his lips again. "I understand, sir. I will take responsibility."

He'd already accepted himself as a dead man, and so easily. The Empire needed more brave soldiers like him. Grant felt another spike of shame and shoved it down.

"Captain, when this situation is investigated, it will no doubt bring much scrutiny on the Five-oh-First. It may even bring about the liquidation of the entire legion."

"That would be unnecessary, sir. This is still the finest Jedi-hunting unit in the Empire."

"You say that, yet your men just helped save the lives of many Jedi."

"Sir, I believe the... disloyal units have already done all they can do. They're with Skirata now, and no longer an inside threat."

There was one simple play to make, an act of mercy. "I believe a case can be made on the behalf of your remaining troops, though I don't believe it would mean much coming from you personally."

"If you would argue for the continued operation of the Legion, sir, I would greatly appreciate it."

"That can be arranged." Grant leaned forward; Melusar leaned back to track his eyes. "Now Captain, you must understand that your men were on a very secret mission to Belsavis. An investigation into them, aside from embarrassing the Five-oh-First, will bring up things that must be kept hidden for the good of the Empire's Jedi-hunting operation."

Melusar swallowed. Knowledge welled in his eyes but he kept his face stiff.

"I hope you understand, Captain, that it's best for the Empire, and *especially* your men, that responsibility for this debacle is settled quickly. Otherwise, well, the fall-out could damage the entire New Order. Responsibility must be taken, of course, but it must be taken quietly."

"I understand, sir." He didn't look away, but his clasped hands were trembling. "I will take care of everything."

"I trust you will. Your service to the Empire is greatly appreciated, Captain, but there are some mistakes that cannot be overlooked."

Melusar nodded slightly. "I'm sorry for everything, sir, but I promise I will set things right."

"I know you will." Grant stepped back. He didn't want to look into the eyes of a dead many any longer.

Grant took to a step to the door, then halted. He turned back to Melusar and raised one hand in a salute. The poor fool deserved at least that much for doing his final duty for the Empire. Melusar stood up and returned his own, fast and crisp. Then Grant turned and walked out of the room.

The admiral walked very slowly down the empty hallway. When he was halfway down he paused, took a few deep breaths, and curled hands into fists to stop their shaking. Grant waited, counting the pulse of blood in his ears, until he heard a single muffled blaster-shot. Then he started walking again.

The mood in *Valediction*'s hangar bay was chaotic but ebullient. The massive space was crammed, bulkhead-to-bulkhead, with freighters and starfighters collected during the evacuation of Bavinyar, but there was just enough room for one additional shuttle to set down once they reached the rendezvous point.

When Jereveth Syne came down the shuttle's landing ramp she was met with cheers from hundreds of refugees, but they were kept from swarming her ship by a line of Mandalorians and clones, unarmed but still armored.

Syne had never been one for crowds, but she stopped at the ramp's base and waved to the people. The cheers grew even higher, and she allowed something even rarer than a wave: the hint of a smile.

She turned her attention to the semi-formal greeting party arrayed before her. A'Sharad Hett stood at the front of the column alongside Kal Skirata, still in gold armor but with his helmet tucked under his arm and a smile creasing his bare face. Behind them were Walon Vau, still masked in black, Master Plett, and Ovolot Qail Uthan, who had taken off her black plasteel armor and now wore the loose white jacket of a scientist. Hallena Devis, apparently unharmed during her captivity, stayed at the back of the group. She

looked curiously reticent and had barely said a word to anyone since her rescue.

"Madam Syne," Skirata called, "I'm happy to transfer command of this ship to you."

He extended a hand, and Syne shook it. "Words aren't enough, Mister Skirata. You've saved tens of thousands of lives today."

"We're not trying to be heroes." The gruff man looked almost bashful.

She glanced over at A'Sharad and a tiny smile creased her lips. "I trust everything went well, A'Sharad?"

He tipped forward in a bow. "The mission was a success, Madam."

Syne turned back to Skirata. "While I appreciate the festive atmosphere, I'd like to talk someplace private."

"No problem. We'll lead the way."

Skirata's men formed a wedge that broke through the crowd. Hett walked alongside Syne and let his arm touch hers lightly. His whole body tingled at contact and he could still sense the life slowly growing inside her. For a moment he was struck dizzy by the enormity of it: the battle was won, his loved ones safe.

Then he remembered and went cold inside. In the frenzy of combat, he'd been able to put his vision of Skywalker's descendant from his mind, but it was still there, waiting in the stillness.

Hett tried to forget it again as they walked to the small conference room. The corridors of the ship had been cleaned for the most part; the dead had been disposed of and thousands of sick crewmen had been confined to secure storage rooms. Some had even been placed in the brig. Their fate was one of many things that was about to be decided.

They arrived in the conference room and took seats around the table. As she settled into her chair, Syne looked to her right and asked Uthan, "I trust I won't be coming down with a fever in a few minutes."

"You should have already been exposed to the antigen by Master Altis and Walon Vau," the scientist said.

"Well, that is a relief." Syne looked across the table to Vau and Skirata. "I must thank you gentlemen again. I wish there was a way for us to compensate you."

"Lady, we've got more money than we need." Vau had taken off his helmet and placed it on the table.

"You've been a very effective fighting force. Master Plett, your Jedi friends were also very helpful."

"You may thank Master Altis for that," said Plett.

"Do you plan on going back to him?" Hett asked.

The Ho'din fixed him with a dark stare. "It is possible. There were a number of children placed under my care, and I have to see to their protection first."

"You've got one of our kids there too," Skirata said. "When are we getting him back?"

There was a meanness in his tone that was hard to miss, but Plett said easily, "If you allow me, I can call *Ince* here immediately."

"We'll do that when we're done here," Skirata said. "We've also got to call our own ships home."

"I heard you say something about the captured clones earlier," Hett said.

Skirata nodded. "You know a lot of my boys are clone deserters. I figure you should offer the captives a chance to follow their lead, if they want to."

"Those men were bred to be loyal," Syne reminded him. "Yours soldiers are the exception."

"I know, but we have an extra incentive for them," Skirata said. "For security purposes I'm not comfortable taking on any more boys than we've got already, but if some want to serve under you in exchange for what we're offering them, well, that's for you and them to work out."

"What about the non-clone officers, then?"

"I recommend slotting them," Vau said, "But if you want prisoners, lady, you can have them, and any clones we don't think we can turn."

"I'll consider it, thank you."

"You should know, on Irmenu we say to take no prisoners, because prisoner is a burden to his captors and liability to his friends. Never be one and never take one."

"He just likes to shoot people," Uthan deadpanned.

"I'm just making a recommendation. Once we're gone you can take it or leave it."

Syne leaned forward. "This has been a very useful alliance. I think we should consider, in the future-"

"Nope." Vau help up a hand. "Not gonna happen."

"Walon's right," Skirata said. "Thanks for the offer, but this is it for us. Good luck with your fight, but it's not ours. We're going to ground and so should you."

Syne wanted to object; the thrill of victory was still strong in her. Before she could, Hett asked, "Do you have a hiding place?"

"Yes, and we're not telling you where. You need to find your own. All of you." Skirata fixed his attention on Syne. "Lady, you've won a pretty big victory, but that just means the Imps are gonna come down harder. You've got a *shebs*-load of civvies to take care of too. You need to do what Mandos do, *ba'slan shev'la*. Scatter, disappear. Don't put all the refugees on one planet. Find a bunch of rocks with little or no people and have them settle there. From what I hear, your people are pretty tough. You can manage."

"That will be difficult," she said. "It will take time."

"Then take it," Vau said. "Like I just told you, you don't want to drag prisoners around. They're a liability."

"They are *our people*, Mister Vau, not prisoners." Syne said sharply.

"They're still a burden," Skirata said. "You're not stupid so don't act like it. Yes, you'll have to scatter your people all over, but they'll all still remember Bavinyar. And you, you'll still have a nice big fleet. You can protect the new planets or you can use your pretty new star destroyer to squeeze Palpy's *gett'se* hard. Your choice either way."

Hett could feel the conflict inside her. Syne gave him a sideways glance and he nodded, very slightly. Scattering the refugees was the only logical choice, and he knew she'd see that when she calmed down.

Without acknowledging Skirata either way, she turned her attention to Plett. “Do you think Master Altis will scatter his people as well?”

“He will if he knows what's good for him,” Skirata said.

“I will relay your advice, once we rendezvous with *Chu'unthor*.”

“Will you at least help us disperse our refugees?” Syne asked the old Jedi.

Plett nodded. “I'm sure Djinn will accommodate you.”

“Then it seems matters are getting settled.” Syne looked to Devis, who had been sitting silently beside Hett the entire time. “Miss Devis, you've been a great help so far. I've talked to Slayke and he says he'd be happy if you'd continue to work with us.”

The woman blinked, as if jerked from some other train of thought. She looked at Syne, then at Plett, and said, “I'm sorry, Madam, but I don't think I'll be able to any longer.”

Syne frowned. “If we did anything to upset you-”

“No, you didn't.” Devis held up a hand. “Master Plett, do you think it would be possible for me travel with you for a while?”

The Ho'din tilted his head slightly. “I don't see any problem with that. May I ask why?”

“I'd like to do something different.” Devis swallowed. “I'd like to take care of people, not hurt them.”

It was such a simple, honest sentiment that it left the room in silence.

When the meeting finished, Vau and Skirata were the first on their feet. They stuck their helmets on their heads and went out the door with Uthan right behind him; Master Plett rose to follow. Devis moved toward him but Hett reached out and gently touched her arm. A familiar

sensation shuddered through the Force; it was fainter than what he felt from Syne, but it was there nonetheless.

She looked at him; he looked at her. The second life within her was so fresh she might not have noticed it herself.

He forgot what he'd meant to ask her. She gently shook her arm free and said, “I'm glad you're all right, Mister Hett. I thought you were dead for a while.”

“I thought you were too,” Hett said.

She didn't know. He was sure of it. He wasn't sure if he should tell her; whatever she'd gone through had put her in a fragile emotional state, and emotions were something Hett still struggled to understand.

No matter what, she was going to find out soon.

“Be careful,” he said at last.

“I should tell you that.” Devis smiled. “Both of you.”

“Yes,” he said, “Likewise.”

Devis frowned a question, but then Plett came up behind her. He said, “If you'll come with me, Miss Devis, I'd like to call Djinn and Margolis.”

“Gladly, Master. I hear Margolis borrowed my ship and I kind of want it back.” She nodded at Hett, then Syne. “Good luck. Both of you.”

They stepped out of the room, leaving Hett and Syne alone. They stood an arm's distance apart. Hett looked around the room, at anything but her, and said, “Much nicer than the one on *Iconoclast*, I have to say.”

“It even has the original walls,” Syne observed. She took a step forward and laid a hand on his forearm. “Thank you, A'Sharad. For everything.”

“I didn't do anything. Skirata and his people, they were the heroes today.”

“I know, but they don't want my thanks.”

“They're Mandalorians. They're not used to being heroic. It doesn't suit them and they know it.”

Syne smiled and touched his face, tracing the tattoo marks on his chin. “And what about you, A'Sharad? The Jedi?”

“Jedi are supposed to be heroes.” He knew what she was asking, and he still didn't have an answer.

Her smile faded. “Even if we won't see Skirata again, I'd like to keep in contact with the Jedi. Altis especially. I think we can help each other.”

“I would too,” he agreed.

He didn't know how to tell her about his vision of a man walking in the sky. He wasn't close to understanding it. Maybe the Jedi would help him, maybe not, but he had to keep his possibilities open, no matter what lay ahead for himself and his new family.

“Still thinking of leaving me, A'Sharad?” she asked coyly, but he could feel the doubt that still lingered.

“I'm with you to the end.” He squeezed her shoulders and and kissed her forehead. “Both of you.”

Gilad Pellaeon sat down on the far side of Vice Admiral Grant's polished carved-wood desk. The admiral was standing on the other side with the dusty curve of Farstine at his back, looking down on the captain with cool blue eyes.

Normally Pellaeon would have felt tense at this kind of meeting. Instead he was simply confused. When they'd dragged him out of the escape pod he'd fully accepted his fate: fast trial, summary execution.

He hadn’t even minded the thought. At least when he was dead he wouldn't fail his friends or be betrayed by old, stupid love.

But Grant was staring down at him like he wasn't quite sure what to do with him. Pellaeon couldn't believe that, because Grant always had a plan of some sort, so he cleared his throat and asked cautiously, “Admiral, what is is you have to tell me?”

Grant stared down at him for a moment more before saying, “I don't need to explain to you the severity of what happened.”

"My failure cost many good men their lives and ruined the siege at Bavinyar. I know. I'm ready to accept responsibility, sir."

"I'm glad, Captain. However, circumstances have come to light indicating that the events that allowed for *Valediction* to be stolen was not something you could have prevented."

The wheels in Pellaeon's mind whirled but got nowhere. "I don't understand, sir."

"I'm speaking of the mutiny, Captain. Several squads of Five-oh-First commandos helped their Mandalorian allies to steal your ship."

"I had no idea, sir. That is to say, I knew that"

Grant waved a hand. "Responsibility for that failure has already been settled. You, Captain, are a more complicated case. Any formal inquiry and punishment for you could stir up many secrets involving the mission to Belsavis and the *Eye of Palpatine*."

No formal trial, then. Grant was being surprisingly polite to a man who was about to get thrown against a bulkhead and quietly shot.

"It's in the best interests of the Empire to keep those details a well-guarded secret. Furthermore, command is eager to move past the embarrassment at Bavinyar and continue the hunt for Syne."

Pellaeon didn't ask where she was. He was still waiting for his death sentence, and grew increasingly confused the longer it took to come.

"Captain, I've been given discretion in your case. I have decided that you are to be reassigned."

He was going mad. He had to have heard wrong. "Reassigned, sir?"

"There is an opening for a non-combat position, captain's rank, at our base on Filve. You'll be overseeing supply and asset management for a section of the shipyards there. I believe it will suit you well."

It was going to be exile, not death. He felt empty inside, disappointed. He barely managed to nod.

"You will, of course, keep the events at Belsavis and Bavinyar utterly secret. If we determine you are the source of any information leaks, we will act accordingly."

He nodded again. If he could wholly erase recent events from his memory, he would.

Grant raised an eyebrow. "Do you have anything to say, Captain Pellaeon?"

"Thank you, sir."

Grant tilted his head to one side. "You may change your opinion in time. Frankly, Captain, you're going to have to be a model officer in every last respect from now on, and even then you might, just *might*, get your own command in another twenty years."

His head jerked in another nod. "I understand."

He should have stood up, saluted, and left, but his limbs wouldn't move. Grant's lips tightened. He drummed his fingers on the desk and said, "That will be all, Captain. You're dismissed."

Pellaeon jerked up and staggered out of the the office. A pair of troops, non-clones in white armor, led him down the hall. They wouldn't take him to the officer's lounge this time, but that was the last place he wanted to be.

He'd walked into Grant's office expecting a death sentence; now he was condemned to live. In some ways that was worse. Death would have erased his memories: the angry devotion in Vernedet's eyes before his last charge, the regret in Hallena's as she stood outside the airlock, wordlessly begging for mercy she didn't deserve.

At the academy they'd said young Pellaeon was a playboy, a man who enjoyed fine brandy and pretty women but didn't really love anything except his job.

They were wrong. Vernedet had known that, and Hallena too. They were gone now, and so was the love, but he couldn't escape them, couldn't forget, no matter how much he wanted to.

He would have to live with them for a long, long time.

Scout had never heard of the planet before, but from orbit it looked pretty good. It had plenty of blue oceans, fat white clouds, and continents green with thick forests. Best of all, it had no sentient population and sat far from major hyperspace routes.

Freighters had been transporting Bavinyari refugees down to the planet for six hours and the main hangar was just starting to clear out. There was finally enough room for *Ince* to settle down, though most of the children who'd sheltered there during the battle remained onboard.

Margolis and Laseema walked down the ramp. The blond woman held Venku in both arms while Laseema hobbled along with a crutch under one shoulder. She had a sad but earnest smile on her face when she saw Scout.

"Thanks for taking care of him," Scout touched Venku's cheek, and the child put a small hand on hers.

"Thank *you*," Margolis said. "I heard you helped Djinn rescue civilians off Bavinyar."

"I wasn't important. Just one piece." It was true, but it she'd felt like part of something so much more.

"Have you heard from Kal?" Laseema asked.

"They're sending someone to pick up you and *Kad'ika*. They should be here soon."

Laseema's smile wilted. "Are you coming back with us, Scout?"

She took a deep breath and shook her head. "I don't think so. I think-"

"Ah, Djinn!" Margolis interjected.

Scout looked behind her to see the old Jedi Master walking along with Ash Jarvee beside him. She watched as Margolis wrapped Altis in a big hug, kissed his cheek, and got a kiss back. No, this was not the Jedi Order she'd been raised in, but it didn't feel strange.

"I was just thanking Scout for her hard work," Margolis told him.

"I was glad to have her with us," Altis smiled generously.

"I also hear she wants to stay with you."

"If you'll have me." Scout dropped her eyes, suddenly shy.

Altis put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm not sure how we're going to proceed from here, Scout. I think we might follow Kal's example and do a scattering of our own. We've kicked the Emperor in a sensitive spot today and he's not going to forget us."

"I know, Master, but I was hoping-"

"First, don't call me 'Master,' for goodness' sake. I'm Djinn." He gave the top of her head a playful bop. "Second, you're welcome to stay with us."

"Oh, thank you Master, ah, Djinn."

He smiled and glanced at Ash. "Think you can break her in?"

"I look forward to it," the other woman said.

Altis laughed, but the sound was drowned out by the roar of an incoming ship. Scout turned, expecting to see another freighter ready to haul people down to the planet, but instead she saw the familiar shape of *Aay'han*.

When the ship set down next to *Ince*, its landing ramp extended and three figures walked down. Scout didn't recognize the dark-skinned woman in front, but she guessed the tall old Ho'din was Plett, and she instantly knew Bardan Jusik.

The woman looked at *Ince*, then at Altis, and said, "I guess you took care of her."

"I knew you'd want her back, Hallena," the old master stuck his thumbs in his belt. "Planning on taking her for another spin?"

"I'm thinking of staying with Master Plett and the kids for a while."

Her expression was grim, and Scout could sense a deep sadness coming off her in the Force. Altis probably knew her better, and his smiled softened without going away.

"Of course, Hallena," he said. "Thanks for all the help."

"I should thank you, Djinn. You gave me direction when I needed it."

Hallena seemed like she still needed direction, but Scout knew it was a long story and she'd never learn the whole of it. As Altis stepped forward to exchange greetings with Plett, Scout made her way over to Jusik, who had taken Venku from Margolis. He and Laseema hovered over the child, looking down at him with deep fondness and deep sorrow.

Scout realized it, finally. "Oh," she said softly, "Darman's dead. Oh, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," Jusik said, though she knew he wasn't. "We got Niner out, though, and the rest of his brothers. And some clones I'd never met before. It was a success."

"So they're all going to live long, healthy lives?"

"Uthan came through fine, if that's what you're asking."

"I'm glad." Scout hugged herself. She felt cold and a little afraid. Leaving the Skirata clan behind and going off with Altis had seemed obvious, even easy, until a minute ago.

Jusik understood her confusion. He set Venku on the ground, so the child could half-stand as he clung to Laseema's leg, and walked Scout away from the others.

"You're not coming back with us, are you?"

"I don't think so. I'm sorry, I don't mean to be ungrateful. I'm so thankful for everything you've done-"

"I know, Scout." His face was serious as he put his hands on her shoulders. "This won't be easy either, you know."

"Yeah, Master Altis- Djinn- was just saying how he's on Palpatine's *osik* list."

"I'm glad we taught you something." His smile lasted a second. "You're probably right. A *Mando* life isn't for you. But some day you may be required to do something you don't like to protect the people you care about."

"I know. I'll try to be ready."

They stood there in *Aay'han*'s shadow and didn't speak. Scout closed her eyes and so many memories came back: watching the clones play their ballgame in the mud outside

Kyrimorut, long talks with Zey and Kina Ha, the drunken dancing during their last night on Mandalore, Mij Gilamar's friendly grin.

"I'm gonna miss them. Make sure they know that."

"I will."

"Tell Kal he's a good father, a great one. And tell Vau his strill's so ugly it's *adorable*. And tell Uthan-" Her voice caught in her throat. "Tell her I want to be a healer. Like her."

Jusik frowned. "She isn't always a healer, Scout."

"I know, but she chose to be one when it counted. That's what matters. What we choose."

Jusik understood that, maybe better than anybody else.

"Good luck, Scout. May the Force be with you."

"Yeah, you too," she said, then realized she might have said the wrong thing.

Jusik, though, just nodded. "We'll see about that. Right now, I've got something better."

"What's that?" she frowned.

"Family," he said. "I have mine. And I think you have yours, too."

Scout looked behind her. Altis was chuckling at something Plett said and Ash was weaving her hands around and telling Margolis a story.

Maybe she did have one, finally. She looked forward to finding out.

After dismissing Pellaeon, Octavian Grant went down to the officer's lounge in hope of finding a greater variety of drinks than he had stashed in his desk drawer. The selection of wines, brandies, and cognacs was indeed excellent, though his pleasure was dampened when someone shouted his name.

Only Demetrius Zaarin would be crass enough to call out a higher-ranked man from across the officer's lounge. Thankfully, it was mostly empty at that late hour. The lights were dim, the background music soft, and the view

of the stars excellent. Except for the company, it would have been perfect.

Zaarin was sitting in front of the broad viewport, drinking from a glass of something dark. Grant, slightly surprised he wasn't just downing it straight from the bottle, poured himself a very full glass of wine and started carefully across the carpeted floor.

"Well, well," Zaarin said, "It looks like they're still letting you in here."

"I have retained my rank, despite recent events." Grant sat down in the seat next to Zaarin and angled his chair so they both faced the stars.

"Color me surprised. Are they letting you go after Syne still?"

Grant fought a sour face and drank a mouthful of wine. "Unfortunately, naval command has decided to transfer the hunt for Syne directly to Eriadu."

"So it's Tarkin's mess now?"

"Naturally, I'll be giving him advice."

"Of course." Zaarin chuckled and gulped down whatever he had, probably some brandy. "I'll give you credit, Octavian. It *was* a good plan, until *Vindicator* switched sides. Who'd you get to fall on his sword for you? Pellaeon? I heard they found him in an escape pod. Never saw him as the deserting type…"

"That officer has been... reassigned."

"Well, I guess an inquiry into the Belsavis mission might have been awkward," Zaarin said with a little smile. "So who was it?"

Grant thought on that pale face, those pale eyes, the fast salute right before he'd ended it all.

"It doesn't matter. The issue's settled."

"Oh, what is that, Octavian? A tinge of conscience, maybe? I'm disappointed."

Grant scowled at him. "What about *you*? Are you absolved of all your failures?"

“What failures? Belsavis and Bavinyar were fine test-runs for the prototype TIE fighter. I've been in talks with Sienar to begin mass production.”

“I've never understood your zeal for fighting tin cans.” Grant rubbed his temple.

“You fleet admirals, you always underestimate the little ships. With the right starfighters, a man could take over the whole Empire.”

“Aren’t you a little over-ambitious? Well, don’t worry, I’ll keep your secret.”

“Why shouldn’t I be ambitious? I had a good day.”

Grant felt mildly sick at the thought of Zaarin, of all people, coming through this mess unscathed. He swallowed a little more wine and said, “What about Keldor? Any news of him?”

“I was about to ask you the same question. Maybe he'll raise his head again, when he thinks he has something new to sell.”

Grant thought of all the men involved the past mission. Zaarin had thrived, and Keldor would be back some day. Melusar was dead, Pellaeon exiled. It seemed a poor system that punished the good men and rewarded the bad.

Grant wasn't deluded enough to wonder what side of that equation he belonged on. Sparks of conscience were a annoyance compared to death or exile, and wine doused them effectively. He emptied his glass in one long gulp and felt his head start to swim.

“My, my,” Zaarin said, “No need to rush. After all, they're keeping you stuck at Farstine indefinitely, aren't they?”

“For now,” he said, “But not forever.”

“Have a plan, do you?”

“Not yet,” he admitted, “But someone's going to have to catch Syne eventually, and it won't be Tarkin. He has an administrator's mind, not a military one.”

"She's already humiliated you what, twice? Three times? Not bad for a waif like that. Do you really want to be embarrassed a fourth time?"

"There won't be a fourth time. The next time we meet will be the last."

He believed what he said. He had to. He wouldn't respect himself until he brought Syne down, and he knew nobody else would either.

A wry smile settled on Zaarin's face. He stood and picked up his own glass and Grant's. "In the mood for something stronger, Admiral?"

Grant settled into his soft chair and looked out at the stars. "Whatever you'd like, Commodore. I leave the choice in your capable hands."

28

"The thrill of victory, even one as crazy and exhilarating as the one at Bavinyar, fades in time. You pause, look back, and count what you've lost as well as won. It's only then that you realize the cost of it all. Then you have to find a ways of living with it."

It was a planet that nobody had ever heard of except for Rav and Parja Bralor when they were working a hired scouting mission two years back, but it was far away from everything and its fields, mountains, and forests almost felt like Mandalore, so it was a fitting place for a new beginning.

They set *Aay'han* and *Concord Night* down in a large clearing and, though it probably wasn't necessary, pulled a big camouflage net over them both. They spent the rest of that day getting supplies and personnel in order. Uthan was eager to set up an operation room aboard *Concord Night* where she could perform the procedure to slow clones' aging, and the Delta, Sixer, and Yayax clones practically overran each other to help her.

When the sun went down and plunged them into twilight, they were close to being done, and some clones, especially Spar and Joc, wanted to get the operation going right away. Uthan, who'd already spent over ten hours explaining the procedure to Syne's doctors on *Valediction* for use on its captured crew, insisted that she needed a good rest before she starting pumping anything into anybody's bone marrow.

So when night fell over the primeval forest, they rolled a few logs into the center of the clearing and started a bonfire. The night air was chill so most of the clones and Mandos stayed in their armor, minus helmets. The handful without armor- Uthan, Besany, Laseema, little Venku, were wrapped up layers of blankets and coats.

Somehow, various bottles of alcohol had been procured and were merrily passed around the fire. It wasn't long before everything was laughing and joking. Scorch sat between Soru and Corr, and listening to those two banter back and forth over his head was an experience unlike any other.

After a while he tuned out their chatter. Vau was petting his ugly strill and talking to Boss and Fixer; Scorch couldn't hear what his *buir* was saying but something, either alcohol or sentiment, had softened the traditional harshness in his expression. The Yayax boys and the other three Sixers had made little groups and were talking among themselves. The three Nulls were passing around a bottle of Tralus whiskey that Mereel had supposedly liberated from the personal cabin of *Valediction*'s captain. Besany and Laseema sat, holding Venku between them. Fi and Parja were nestled close, armored shoulders and soft foreheads pressed together. Spar was ranting about something to Sull and Rav Bralor while Jusik and Uthan talked quietly. Jusik was rolling Taay'hai's *beskar* flute between his palms and Scorch noticed that Bralor was handling a piece of black forearm-plating that must have come from the son she lost on *Valediction*. Finally, there were Niner and Kal Skirata, sitting on opposite ends of the fire, staring into the flame and speaking to no one. Both of them looked lonely and lost and sad.

Scorch wondered if this was what it had been like at Kyrimorut. He wondered if there had been long nights where people just sat outside and talked and drank and enjoyed a life without rules or schedules, a life where all that mattered was filling time with the people you cared

about. Kyrimorut couldn't have been all happy times either; too many crises, too many missing brothers, and the lingering pain of Etains death. Still, this one evening felt so much *richer* than the entire year of nights Scorch had spent on Triple Zero, locked away in his barracks while the endless city lights drowned out the sky.

He felt the cold wind bite his face, looked up at so many stars, and wondered what he was going to do with another sixty years. He frankly hadn't a clue; he hadn't gotten to sample the lives of 'normal' beings as much as the Nulls or even the Omegas.

He wanted to stay with his brothers. He knew that. He'd be nothing without family, which maybe meant that Vau and Skirata had made real Mandos out of them after all.

At one point Vau rose from his feet and started bellowing for everyone to shut up. Not everyone heard him, but Jusik took Taay'hai's flute in his mouth and blew as hard as possible; the shrill noise made everyone freeze and caused Lord Mird jump up and start yelping.

Vau batted his strill on the side of the head and said, "Okay, good. Now, listen, all of you. We lost good *vode* to get here. They've gone on to the *Manda'yaim* but we've still got to remember them, you hear?"

"Toast to them, *buir*," Scorch called.

He realized as he spoke that he'd never called Vau that before. Skirata's boys called him *buir* all the time but for the Deltas, they'd only had a 'Sarge.'

There was a tiny pause, the kind most beings wouldn't even notice and might have even been in Scorch's head. Then Fixer said, "Yeah, *buir*, toast!"

"Good idea." Never one to get mushy or linger on sentiment, Vau snapped his fingers and pointed at Mereel. "Give me the bottle you selfish *chakaar*."

"Get some of your own," Mereel called back and took a swig.

Other clones started booing so Ordo wrestled the bottle away from him and passed it down the circle to Vau.

Vau held up the bottle out by the neck and said, “To the honored dead. *Oya Manda!”*

“Oya Manda!” others called, and raised their glasses, or barring that their fists.

“To Taay'hai,” Jusik held up the flute.

“To Jover,” Rav Bralor raised the armor plact.

“For Atin,” said Laseema.

“And Jilka,” added Besany.

“And Mij,” said Uthan.

“To Sev, *k’oyacyi,*” Vau toasted and drank.

“To *Kom'ika*, *Ad'ika,* and *Prud'ika*,” Jaing called.

“To Maze,” said Ordo. “And to-”

“To Zey,” Jusik said. His voice shook.

“To Etain and Darman,” Skirata said at last.

The circle fell silent. Some drank. A heavy mood had settled, one Vau probably hadn't intended when he started the toast.

Suddenly Niner popped to his feet. Lots of eyes went to him but he stared across the leaping flames to Skirata. His jaw worked soundlessly for a moment before he said, “*Kal'buir*, we need to talk.”

Skirata simply nodded and pushed off his seat. Niner left the circle too, and both of them disappeared into the dark.

The awkward quiet lingered until Mereel called, “Hey, *Bard'ika*, pass me that *bes'bev*. I want to give it a shot!”

“You can't play, you *di'kut*,” Jaing said.

“Hey, I can *shabla* well learn, can't I? I'm gonna have plenty of time.”

“*Wal'ika*, give me back the booze,” Ordo called, “We're gonna need it.”

That stared a round of laughs. Corr and Soru got back to bantering. Scorch leaned back, closed his eyes, and listened with a tiny smile on his cold, cold face.

For the next fifteen minutes after *Kal'buir* and Niner wandered off, I kept speaking with Uthan. I'd already told her about Scout and she was telling me, in mild detail,

about how she planned on quietly distributing the technical knowledge of how to stop clones' fast aging. She seemed to have found a purpose at last; I was glad for her, and gladder for the clones she would heal, but I couldn't take my mind off my father and brother. Since we'd freed him from his prison cell Niner had been a shell of a man. I attributed it to guilt over letting Darman get killed, but when he called *Kal'buir* out like that I wondered if there wasn't more to it.

As for my father, I knew why he was down. He hadn't heard from Ny and Ruusaan since before the mission to Bavinyar. There was, as yet, no conformation that *Cornucopia* had ever survived the battle. I'd told him that Ny was a good pilot with a tough ship, and she'd surely made it through. *Kal'buir* had said yes, he was sure she had, but that seemed to make him more grim, which I couldn't understand. I could only guess that something had happened between him and the two women he'd been bringing into his family.

Kal'buir appeared suddenly from the dark. He stepped up behind me and tapped me on the shoulder, making Uthan and me both jump.

He said simply, “Come with me, son.”

I gave Uthan a small nod and left. I followed *Kal'buir* over to *Aay'han*, where we climbed up into the main hold.

“Where's Niner?” I asked, looking around the empty cabin.

“In the back. Crew quarters.” *Kal'buir* jabbed a thumb over his shoulder.

“*Buir*, what's wrong?”

He didn't look at me. He couldn't. He stared at his feet and his face twisted as he said, “*Bard'ika*, Rede didn't kill Darman. Niner did.”

I heard, but I didn't understand.

He pressed on. “Dar was the one who told the Imps about Belsavis. That was why they attacked. Dar got them all killed.”

"He couldn't have betrayed us," I sputtered. I didn't accept. I couldn't. It was too much. "Dar would never do that, he-"

"He didn't know his *vode* were going. He thought it was just the Jedi. He wanted to kill Zey. And he did. And when they found, Niner..." He exhaled hard. "The last time I talked to them, I told Niner he was the sergeant and he had to take responsibility. I didn't think things were that bad. I didn't *want* to think it. I meant he had to keep Dar in line, keep him from doing anything stupid, but Niner, he thought... he thought..."

Kal'buir couldn't talk anymore. Tears rolled down his rough cheeks. He didn't wipe them away.

"Oh, *buir*," I breathed.

My mind was still grappling with the enormity of what had happened. I hadn't talked directly to Niner or Darman since Order 66; that had all been *Kal'buir* and the Nulls. I'd had so many other problems to deal with I'd never stopped to realize how badly Etain's death had hurt Darman, or what the pain could turn him into.

"This is my fault," I told him. "I'm so sorry, *buir*. If I hadn't wanted to go to Belsavis they'd all be alive, even Dar."

"No son, it was mine." *Kal'buir* put both hands on my shoulders and finally looked into my eyes. "Don't you get it? They were my boys. *My boys*. I was too busy trying to get a bunch of *shabla jetii* safe and I left them dangling in the wind."

"*Buir*, no. We gave them a chance to come back once, remember, but Darman, he didn't want to come. He wanted to stay back and kill Jedi."

"It's my fault!" he snapped, "*Mine*! They were my sons! I should have done something!"

He looked away. Fresh tears ran down his face. When he spoke next it was almost a whimper. "*Bard'ika* do you think... All those things I told Dar, about how Jedi were no good, how they were baby-snatchers and turned everything

to *osik*... Did *I* make him hate Jedi so much? Did *I* do that? Was *I* the one who twisted him up so much he'd kill his own *vode*?"

"It's not your fault, *buir*," I whispered, and I knew he'd never believe it, not really, just like I've never stopped believing it was mine.

I looked to the back of the cabin, at the sealed door. "Niner's a mess, isn't he?"

"He shot Darman in the *head*," *Kal'buir* sniffed. "He can't live with it, *Bard'ika*. He *can't*."

Coldness settled inside of me. "There's something I can do. I've done it before."

I realized it was why *Kal'buir* had brought me here. Still, he didn't pressure me. He'd been reluctant to even ask for it. He wiped wetness from his eyes and said, "Don't do it unless he wants it."

"If I don't..." I couldn't finish it. We both knew that one day, sooner rather than later, he'd eat his own blaster.

"*Buir*," I said, "That's why you brought me, right?"

"Not unless he wants it," he repeated.

I didn't start for the door. I said, "I can do it to anyone, you know."

He frowned, like he'd never even thought of that, then shook his head. "I can live with it, *Bard'ika*. I have to."

"It's an awful scar to keep."

"I've got plenty of scars," he said, but this one was different from all the others, and we both knew it.

"The others," I said, "We can't tell them."

"No. Let 'em think Rede did it."

"Then we'll live with it. Together."

He nodded but didn't look at me. We knew things would never be the same between us. There was nothing more I could say, so I walked with long, slow steps for the door. I hesitated before entering, but only for a moment.

I found Niner sitting on the bottom level of a bunk bed. He had his head in his hands and didn't look up, even when I softly called his name.

I sat down next to him on the bunk and put a hand on his back. It rested on the rim of his armor, just below his bowed neck and head. They looked so naked, exposed, vulnerable.

"Niner," I said, "I heard what happened."

"I killed him," Niner said, so soft I could barely hear.

"It wasn't your fault."

"I killed Darman. How am I supposed to look at *Kad'ika* now?"

"The Darman you killed wasn't Kad's dad. That Darman... he died with Etain."

Niner's shoulders shook. "It's not that simple. This isn't some Jedi light-side dark-side *osik.*"

"I know. But sometimes somebody can change so much, get so twisted inside, all they've got left is hurt. You took Dar's pain away. That was a mercy." I think I was starting to believe the words as they came out. Right then I need to believe in something, anything.

"I didn't just kill him, *Bard'ika*. I failed him. I was his brother, his sarge, and I just let him slide all the way down. I should have done something. *Kal'buir* would have found a way to stop him. I was afraid. I didn't know what to *do*."

I knew there was nothing I could say to salve his conscience. There was one thing I could do, but I was afraid. Once I did, I would never look at Niner the same way again.

"He was my brother and I failed him," Niner said. "I couldn't help him, couldn't fix him. All I could do was kill him." He shook again. I saw tears fall to the floor. "I can't live with it, *Bard'ika.*"

I knew I had to do it. Whatever pain I'd take on was nothing compared to what Niner had now.

Slowly, I rested my hand on the back of his head.

"I can help you, Niner." He didn't move, didn't even tremble. I said, "Do you want me to help you?"

"I can't do this, *Bard'ika*."

"I'll help you."

I slowly ran my fingers through his short black hair and felt the skin of his scalp. He shuddered just a little at my touch, but didn't object. He didn't say anything. He just stayed there, head bowed, and waited.

When I'd reached into Arla Fett's mind and rearranged her memories, I experienced a lifetime of torture and madness in a matter of seconds. I'd had to steel myself against them, observe them from a distance like a mechanic or a doctor, and carefully remove the worst ones while still leaving a working human being behind when all the cuts were done. It was very difficult, and those awful experiences I'd stolen from her mind lingered in nightmares for a long time afterward.

On a technical level, changing Niner's memories was much easier. On a personal one, it was agony.

I didn't have the reach very far. Suddenly I was standing in that empty ready-room with a pistol in my hand and Darman bowed forward in his chair, weeping. I felt the gun shake in my hand and smelled the whiff of ozone, and then I saw a figure in black armor break through the door.

I went deeper. I talked frantically with *Kal'buir* in the blastboat, worried endlessly over what to do with Darman, and never found the strength to confront him even though I knew what was happening. I remembered the pain of breaking my back on Coruscant and my relief and unspeakable gratitude when Darman, freshly bleeding from Etain's death, volunteered to stay with me. I remembered all the ops on Triple Zero and other planets during the war. I remembered meeting Darman, Fi, and Atin for the first time and wondering how these new guys were ever going to replace the brothers I'd already lost.

I remembered the kid with a padawan's braid whose eyes went wide with stupid boyish excitement when he saw clones in full gear for the first time.

I couldn't stand it. I pulled out, almost all the way, and then I stopped to snag a few key memories: the ready room, the tense conversations in the blastboat, the mounting

sense of helplessness and dread. In its place I left a few simple images of the soldier in black, standing in the doorway, firing one red shot at Darman as he jumped to his feet, and a blue one after that.

And then I was done.

Niner was still bowed forward with his head in his hands. He was breathing slower now and no longer shook. I got up and staggered out of room. *Kal'buir* was waiting in the main cabin and I got two steps toward him before I buckled. He rushed to catch me and hold me up. When I squeezed my eyes shut I was in the ready room, Darman's back in front of me, with a gun in my hand, poised eternally before the killing blow.

"Is it done?" *Kal'buir* asked.

I nodded without opening my eyes.

When Niner left the back room on *Aay'han* his father and brother were gone. He walked down the landing ramp and into the night. He felt slightly dazed, as though he'd been roughly awakened from sleep, and he couldn't remember his conversation with either Skirata or Jusik clearly.

He wandered to the warmth and the light. The fire was still going strong. Everyone was still talking and sharing drinks. He saw Jusik sitting on the far side of the ring with Levet, but the other man didn't seem to notice him.

"Hey Niner! *Ner'ika*!" Someone called, and he saw Fi waving.

Parja was still with him. She had her head resting on his shoulder but she picked it up when Niner approach.

"You doing okay, *ner vod*?" Fi asked.

"I think so. I just... had to talk with *Kal'buir*." He remembered standing there in *Aay'han*'s dark hold. He remembered going weak at the knees and breaking down in tears as his feelings all spilled out but he couldn't recall what his father had told him.

"We're glad you're here, Niner," Parja said. "Especially Fi. He's told me everything about you."

"Really?" Niner sat down on Fi's other side. "Am I all you two ever talk about?"

"Well, not the *only* thing," Fi said, and Parja giggled. It was such a girlish noise from a tough *Mando* warrior. Fi's smile was innocent, happy. They felt natural together, and Niner allowed himself to wonder, just a little, what it would be like to have a someone himself.

He looked around the fire at the others. Ordo had his arm around Besany and Laseema was hugging Venku tight as the child watched the leaping bonfire with a captivated expression. Even Walon Vau was petting Lord Mird with obvious affection. Everyone else was talking, laughing, and drinking their way through the night.

"I wish Darman were here," he said. "He would have loved this. Atin too."

Fi pulled his arm away from Parja and leaned closer to his brother. "Atin got to live a little bit as a free man. Not enough, but a little."

"Dar didn't at all. I wish..." He sighed and bowed his head. Parja quietly excused herself and walked away.

"You did all you could, Niner." Fi put a hand on his back. "I know you did."

"No I didn't. I could have saved him. If I'd been just a second faster, I could have nailed Rede." The memory was still vivid, as if it had just happened minutes ago.

"It's okay, *Ner'ika*. Scorch and Boss plugged Rede on the destroyer. Dar can rest easy now. Atin can too, you know. *Buir, Bard'ika*, even Corr, they all helped take down that Sith witch."

"It doesn't bring anyone back."

He remembered the smoldering hatred Darman had gained after his wife's death, He'd wanted revenge on the Jedi while knowning full well it wouldn't bring Etain back. He was only glad Darman hadn't let his hate consume him.

Niner leaned back and looked at the stars. "What are we going to do now? We can't drink around the campfire every night forever."

"The Nulls would probably argue, but you're right. We'll break into groups. Scatter and then come back again later, when the Imps stop looking for us. But you and me, *ner vod*, we're never splitting up. Never again."

If they'd all stayed together, either on Mandalore or Triple Zero, things would have been different. Darman would have never grown distant, Atin wouldn't have gotten killed, Rede would never have betrayed them. But all those things had happened, and Niner would have to live with it. With his brothers, he just might be able to.

"Never again." He held Fi's arm tight. "Not ever."

Sometimes you reached a point where you couldn't run any further and the grief finally caught up.

After leaving *Aay'han*, Skirata had forced a smile and told Jusik to rejoin the party. Then he'd staggered off in the opposite direction, deeper and deeper into the dark.

He wandered until all light and sound vanished. He let himself lean against the trunk of a tall tree and stared upward at so many stars peeking through the shifting needles of overhead pine-branches. The brightness seemed impossibly distant, and the darkness of the nightall-embracing. He felt like he was going to be swallowed whole by its void.

Tears blurred starlight. He shut his eyes and darkness was all. After all that had happened, all he'd lost, he'd thought he could keep ahead of the grief, maybe even justify it somehow, but the truth behind Darman's fall had shattered the illusion.

A long, long time ago he'd left his blood children behind so he could help Jango train his mysterious army. He'd done it from loyalty to his *Mand'alor*, and because the life he'd had then was a gaping hole that needed something to fill it. What he'd found on Kamino was a horror where small boys were pulled out of cloning vats and sent off to die like worthless droids. Everything he'd done since, every last thing, had been about escaping his complicity in those

actions. He'd told himself that if he saved the Nulls, the Omegas, even Vau's Deltas, if he gave them the real lives of real men that was theirs by birthright, it would somehow make up for all the millions of boys who'd been sent across the galaxy to be slaughtered.

When he opened his eyes the stars were all there, bright and infinite and cold. They were the eternal reminder of the smallness of his redemption and the vastness of a crime for which there would never be ample justice.

The most he could have ever lighted was one candle in the long night, and he'd even failed at that. He'd failed his adopted family, just as surely as he'd failed his blood one. He couldn't blame Ruu and Ny for leaving him.

He wiped his eyes dry and watched the stars until he'd lost all sense of time and his pain dulled to a feeling of aching exhaustion. He was jarred from it all when a ship roared overhead, propelled by thrust-engines trailing red.

Fear banished everything in an instant. He didn't know how the Imps could have found this place but it was too late to wonder. He'd left his helmet on *Aay'han*, stupidly, so he stumbled his way through the forest, nearly falling a half-dozen times and knocking into trees over and over.

When he finally saw the light of the bonfire there were still people around it. Confused, he stumbled onward until he saw a third bulky shape settled next to *Aay'han* and *Concord Night*. Even in the dark, he could tell it was *Cornucopia*.

By the time Skirata got to the ship the landing ramp was already down and people stood around it, illuminated by the light spilling from inside. He saw Walon Vau talking to Ruusaan while Lord Mird darted between their legs, and all three Nulls crowded around Ny Vollen.

He stood on the edge of the light, afraid to step inside. Ny spotted him and an honest smile spread on her face.

"Where have you been, Shorty?" she called. "Your boys were all worried about you."

"Where were you, *buir*?" Ordo asked.

He sniffled back tears and smiled. “Just thinking about a few things, *Ord'ika*. Don't worry about me.”

Ruu broke off from Vau. “Some place you found here, *buir*. Are we going to stay here long?”

“We've still got to figure that out.” He stepped awkwardly into the light. It stung his eyes and made him wince.

“Sorry we took so long getting here,” Ny said. “There was a little, ah, *disagreement* between some of the Bavinyari refugees we picked up.”

“Did you slap 'em silly? Straighten 'em out?” Mereel asked.

Ny waved a hand. “We had to stop at two separate systems to drop them off, and when we got to *Valediction* you were already gone.”

“Then how did you find us?” Skirata asked.

“I made sure Ny got the fallback coordinates from Rav,” Jaing said.

“Your boys are more on the ball than you are, Kal,” Vau said. “You should thank them.”

“Thank you.” Skirata blinked. “I'm sorry, I thought-”

“Thought what?” Ny tilted her head, honestly confused.

When he didn't respond right away Ruu asked, “What was it, *buir*?”

Something in his head, something he let take over when he stood too long in the dark. He shook his head and said, “It doesn't matter. Welcome back.”

Ruu stepped in for a quick hug and Skirata returned it. She stepped back and then Ny was in front of him. He knew all eyes were on him and for that moment he didn't care. He clamped both arms around her and planted one kiss on her cheek.

When she pulled away Ny asked, “Did you get him back?”

He knew what she was asking. He nodded.

“Which was one was it?” she asked softly.

“Niner. We got Niner back.” His voice broke.

Niner but not Darman. Just the thought was like a knife-twist in the guts. Every time he looked at Niner or *Kad'ika* he'd feel that knife, every time. He deserved to feel it.

Ny pressed a warm hand against his face, smudging cold tears. "It'll be okay, Shorty. Really."

It wouldn't be. He knew that. This scar was different from the other ones. Still, looking into Ny's eyes, he could forget about it for a time. He could escape.

"You're getting *shabla* soft, Kal," Vau said.

"You're one to talk," Skirata grunted and told Ny, "He's the one who wanted to jack a whole vicstar just to get his boys back."

"Oh yeah." Ruusaan looked at the figures ringed around the fire. "That's a lot more clones than I remember."

"Lot of 'em are new to me too," Skirata admitted. "But come on, I'll introduce you."

The bonfire was like a big, hot candle in the dark. The ones still left sat in a noisy ring around it: the ones he'd saved, and the ones who'd saved him.

As they walked, Ny said, "You pick up sons like *osik* picks up flies, don't you?"

"Well, *that's* a great metaphor," Ruu muttered.

"Kal just likes saving people," Vau said from behind them. "The *di'kut*'s got a messiah complex, if you haven't figured that out already."

"That's not true," Skirata insisted.

"I know," Ny sighed and hooked her arm around his. "You just love your boys."

It was true. Like a candle it wasn't enough to beat the night, but it was all he'd ever had, and all he ever would.

Epilogue: Tomorrow's New Country

The last sunlight was gone, but the boy and the man lingered in the forest. Twilight faded to starry night overhead and the darkness around them was silent and still. No wind blew to rustle the invisible branches but the air had gone cold. The boy wondered if this was what death felt like.

When he spoke it filled the silence. “I've always felt... weird around Niner. I never understood why.”

“Do you blame him?” the darkness asked.

The boy had to think about that. After listening to Jusik's whole story he wasn't sure who was really at fault. Niner had pulled the trigger but that one motion had happened because of a long chain of events that tied up Jusik himself, Kal Skirata, his mother Etain, the whole Jedi Order and all the citizens of the Republic-turned-Empire.

The galaxy was a messy, chaotic place and he wondered how anyone could be certain of anything.

“I don't think so,” he said finally. “I don't know who to blame. But I guess it doesn't really matter, does it?”

“No,” Jusik said. “It doesn't. We waited a long time to tell you this. We wanted to make sure you were ready.”

“Does anyone know the whole story besides you and *Kal'ba'buir*?”

“Just us. And now you.”

“Thank you for telling me.”

“You deserve to know about your father. And your mother.”

In listening to his father's tale he'd almost forgotten it, but now he felt the faint unspeakable bond that tied him to Jusik in the dark, and he knew that was his birthright too.

"Are there still Jedi alive?" he asked. "What happened to Altis, and Scout, and all the others?"

"I don't know. But I hope they're okay."

"So you don't... blame the Jedi for what happened to my parents?"

There was a long silence. Finally, the dark said, "I don't blame Scout or Altis. But like you said, blame doesn't matter. Not anymore."

"Sometimes I feel things, special things I don't understand. I can feel you now, *Bard'ika*, even though I can't see you. I guess I have Mom to thank for that."

He didn't speak it, but Venku understood his agreement.

"Do you still use the Force, like you did when you were a Jedi?"

Another pause. "I use it in my way."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't want to touch any fancy unifying Force. I just want to use it like a tool, to help the people I care about. That's why I started calling myself Gotab- engineer."

"But you said it felt incredible at Bavinyar."

"It did. That's why it was dangerous. It pulled me apart from my brothers. I don't want that."

Venku stared into the darkness and thought. "I don't want to be different from them either. I just wish…"

He trailed off. Jusik didn't speak the question; he could feel it. He said, "Do you think my mom's still alive, somehow, in the Force?"

"I don't know."

"But Jedi can do that, can't they?"

"I don't think anyone ever really understood how it worked. But I like to think she's still there, somehow."

"I wish I could talk to her," the boy said. Maybe, somehow, she could bring wisdom that the living couldn't. She could help him make sense of the story he'd been told.

"I don't know if that's possible," Jusik said softly.

"I know. That's why I'm going to think about my brothers instead."

"I'm glad. I'm sure *Kal'buir* will be too."

"I feel weird around him sometimes, too. It's not like Niner. It's like he can never look at me for too long. I thought, maybe, it means he doesn't like me, because I'm part Jedi."

"That's not it."

"Yeah. I get it now."

"When he looks at you too long, all the hurt comes back. *Kal'buir* knows how to work through pain better than anyone, but he hurts as much as you or me. Maybe more."

"I don't want to hurt him."

"I know. And he understands that. But there's nothing either of you can do. You both have to-"

"Live with it," the boy finished.

"That's right."

"I wish there was more I could do."

"Everyone does."

They fell into silence again. Venku breathed out hard, filling the void, and said, "I don't want to get involved in other people's messes either. Mandos shouldn't be dying fighting in other peoples' wars."

"If we hadn't, then all those Jedi kids on Belsavis, and all the people on Bavinyar, hundreds of thousands of them, would have died."

"I know. But my father would have lived."

"Is that more important?"

He put a hand to his head. "I don't know, *Bard'ika*."

"Good. It means you can still learn."

"I don't want to have to make that choice. I want it to be Mandalorians for Mandalorians. We shouldn't be dying for other people."

"We're a bunch of mercenaries, *Kad'ika*. Fighting for others is what we do. Right now there are far more Mandos out in the galaxy than there are on Mandalore."

"I know. But this planet is still home. Isn't it?"

"It's my home. Isn't it yours?"

Most of his short life was just a blur of places and planets as he and his uncles and cousins skipped around the galaxy to keep ahead of the Empire. This planet, and the wild mountains around Kyrimorut, were the first places he'd truly felt safe.

"I want to protect Mandalore," he said. "I want to make the Empire go away and leave this planet for Mandos."

"I don't think you're ready just yet," Jusik said without mockery.

"I know. But... one day."

He waited in the dark until Jusik responded, "There's something you might want, then. After we captured *Valediction*, we found your father's body. And its armor."

Flesh was nothing; armor was all. Venku's hand went to Atin's shoulder-plate, tucked inside his belt.

"We still have some of it," Jusik continued. "It's not much. Not *beskar*, just black Clone armor. But it was his."

"I want it," Venku's voice trembled. "I'll wear it. Atin's too. I know what Darman did, but he was my *buir*, and I…"

His voice trembled and he couldn't say any more. He couldn't forget what Darman had done for him, even if he wanted to. He couldn't hide from it either.

He wondered if the others knew why Jusik had taken him out in the woods today. He wondered what Fi, Ordo, and the rest would think when they saw him wearing Atin's shoulder-plate, how *Kal'buir* would react to Darman's black armor on his own. He wondered if, finally, his *ba'buir* would be able to look him in the eye, or if it would widen the gulf between them.

Either way, he knew he had to do it. Family was family.

Venku heard Jusik remove something from the pouch at his waist.

"You might want these, too," the man said, and twin beams of bright blue-white light split the darkness.

Jusik stood with one lightsaber blazing in either hand, illuminating both their faces. The light stung Venku's eyes but he still stared, speechless.

"There were Etain's," he said. "And now they're yours."

"But... What do I do with them?"

"I don't know," Jusik admitted. "You'll have to decide for yourself one day."

Still holding down the buttons, Jusik shifted his grip and held their pommels out for Venu to touch. The boy, very carefully, wrapped his hands around both weapons. He slipped his small thumbs beneath Jusik's and took them for himself.

They were heavier than he'd thought. He looked between the blue-white pillars and said, "Thank you, *Bard'ika*."

There was a smile on the man's face, but it was very sad. "Nobody's used those since your mother died. Until now."

"Thank you," Venku's voice cracked. He felt the tears coming and let the lightsabers wink out. He placed the heavy cylinders in his lap and silently wiped them away.

They remained in darkness and silence for a long time until Jusik said, "Are you ready to go home, *Kad'ika*?"

"Yes." He barely kept his voice even. "Let's go."

"Do you want to use the lightsabers?"

"I don't think I'm ready."

"It's all right, *Kad'ika*. You don't have to be, not yet."

"Will you help me through the dark?"

"That's what I'm here for."

Venku hooked one lightsaber around his belt and held tight to the other. Jusik took his free hand. They walked silently into the forest and disappeared into the long night.